

## **Shadowlit Façades**

*Develop every aspect*

*Enhance its foetal form*

*Distort for the purpose of another aim*

*For you shall know me*

*See why in shadows I hide*

## **Darkness Dying**

*“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...And the Dark Lord will mark **him** as his equal, but **he** will have power the Dark Lord knows not...And either must die at the hands of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...”*

## **Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, British Edition, Page 741**

An album, opened at the middle. A photograph, old enough that its edges were slightly tattered, new enough that it was in color. Two thirteen-year-old girls making faces at the camera. One had a round, chubby face, the other sharp, glinting blue eyes. Arms wrapped around each other's shoulders and waists, long, thick brown hair mingling with shining, white-blond curls. And on the table, a blue glass bangle and much folded and creased letter, teardrops glittering on it, signed *Marlene*.

It is twilight, an eerie October dusk made for sprites and swift black phantoms. The windows of the bedroom are open and cold air rushes in. The wind shrieks outside, like a cry of mourning, of sorrows without beginning or end.

There is a woman at the open window. Fifteen years ago she was one of the girls in the photograph – plump-faced, sweet, little Alice

Belby. Her face is now thin, barely recognizable, it's roundness sharpened into the hollowness of cheeks and jutting chin, creased with crow's feet. Her hair is still thick and long, but grey threads glint among the brown, while her eyes, once so full of laughter, are now bloodshot from recent tears. A cobweb of thick scars stands out stiffly and cover the right side of her face, which is mottled yellow and purple and grey.

Alice Longbottom looks far older than her twenty-eight years now. Her soft mouth – the only part of her that has not been altered almost beyond recognition in fifteen years – forms the word, *Marly, Marly, Marly*, over and over again, like a chant, a futile refrain. She doesn't have the strength, she thinks, to go on living, just living when every moment, every sharp breath drawn is agony.

She wishes she were dead, that she could die for the sake of the ones she loves. She wants to die for them, so that they may live, now in this cold purple twilight, with the wind weeping outside. For Marlene and Gideon who she knows cannot be alive now. For Kingsley who tried – and failed – to save Edmond. For Emmeline, raped and left to die fourteen years ago. For Frank, whose eyes are more dead than alive.

But most of all for her son. For little Neville.

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Andromeda Tonks always sits like a lady, with her legs daintily crossed, her back straight and never, never touching the back of her chair, her slender, white hands folded gracefully on her lap, head held high, and chin neatly tucked in. She's given up the gowns she used to be decked in, day and night, for Muggle clothes years ago – overalls, jeans, skirts that graze her middle thighs. But what she cannot give up is her bearing – the grace of a daughter of the House of Black inculcated in her, years ago, before she could even read.

Today, she stares across the kitchen table at eight-year-old Dora slouched across the sofa, emptying the contents of her Trick-or-Treat Bags. Little Nymphadora has gone out in style today as a princess. A *princess* of all things. With her long, white-blond hair and flowing, rosy-pink ball-gown, she looks unnaturally like eight-year-old Cissy.

It's a beautiful night for Halloween, she thinks, eyes straying from her daughter's golden head to the windows, over which delicate lace drapes hang. It's bolted tightly, but she can still hear the wind howling outside. It sings an ancient melody, it seems to her. Of rage and retribution – that vicious circle without beginning or end, with no hope of redemption or justice – a warning and a prophecy at once. Ted and Dora would both laugh at her if they heard her saying that it's a dark omen, but she can't help thinking so.

She shivers and draws her paisley-print shawl tightly around herself, a silent prayer rushing to her lips that she and all that are hers – Ted, Dora, Mother, Cissy, Cissy's child – will be spared the wrath of the approaching storm.

*It's coming.*

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Two small beds and a crib arranged in a row. Three little children fast asleep in them, red curls tousled on white pillows. Outside, the wind screeches and within, Molly Weasley gazes at her three youngest sons. Her pale, weary face and lackluster brown eyes are illuminated by a candle, and stand out in stark contrast to the vivid red hair that falls down to her waist.

Nine-year-old Charlie and five-year-old Percy occupy the room next door. Bill is at Hogwarts – a small smile brightens her face when she remembers that he's probably enjoying the Halloween feast at school – and two-month-old Ginny sleeps in her parents' room.

Molly is too tired to think. She's dimly aware that she should be frightened – *When the wind howls in October and the black cat crosses your door* and all that superstitious tripe – but she's too tired to be. Let others, who are not as bogged down by pain and heartache, whom war has not touched personally, be frightened. Within the span of seven months, she has lost two brothers – bright-eyed, carefree Fabian ripped to pieces by Death Eaters in a dark alley in Newcastle months ago and now, six days ago, chivalrous, noble Gideon, whose body will never be found.

Let others seek omens in autumn storms and tea leaves that prophecy doom. Molly Prewett was once one of them.

That was another world.

Molly Weasley, scarred forever by death and war, anguish and constant strain, has seen too much to be frightened anymore. There is nothing left to fear, she thinks, staring at the bare walls of the little bedroom. Then her glance slides down to the red curls of the sleeping little boys, to their chubby faces and tiny fingers and, with a shiver, she knows there is still something left to fear. Something as incalculably terrible – if not more – as losing two brothers.

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*“Hush little baby, don’t say a word... mamma’s going to make sure you get a beautiful, new world...”*

The living room is dimly lit, done up in pretty pastels, delicate watercolors, and sepia-tinted photographs framed on the walls. A heavy, ancient, silver candelabrum, placed on a tapestry-clad coffee table, is the only source of illumination. Old money, whisper the little knick-knacks scattered around the room – the intricately-embroidered tapestries that serve as tablecloths, a fat porcelain pot wreathed with china grapes and inscribed with a verse, a home-made Victorian decoupage.

With her close-cropped, tomato red hair, – too red to be natural – arms garlanded in tattoos, jangling bangles unto her elbows, tie-dyed shirt, and ripped jeans, the woman on the sofa is a living anachronism to the rest of the room. She just doesn't fit.

*“And if that new world doesn’t stay new and beautiful... we’ll just have to make another one, you and me...”*

There is a little boy – almost two years old – in her lap, his head nodding sleepily in time to her soft song, his small arms wrapping around her neck. His golden-blond hair glints in the candlelight, his eyelashes fluttering over his dark brown eyes, so like his mother's.

*“We’ll bring peace together, you and me, we’ll make a better world, together we will, it’s not that hard...”*

Outside, in the inky-black night, the wind clamors like a ravenous beast. A storm is rising. Inside, in the warm room, the mother’s voice rings softly, sweetly, her son’s arms wrapped protectively about her neck.

*“It’s not that hard, oh no, it isn’t, we’ll try and we’ll try again and we won’t give up, not ever, oh no...”*

Saoirse Smith has been touched by war, but not yet by the shadow of death. Her face is still soft, her eyes still bright, unscarred physically and emotionally. The world is dark, she knows, but maybe, just maybe, it won’t always be dark. Peace will come. It has to come.

*“So hush little baby, don’t say a word... hush, little one and look all around you, there’s beauty still left... hush, little baby...”*

She still has hope left.

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The storm has blown over, and now Lily Potter stands, with her husband and daughter, in the garden. It’s two in the morning and a draught of air rustles the leaves of the trees, their leaves glowing softly silver in the moonlight. She’s only twenty-one, little more than a girl, really. Spontaneity is the keyword and now that she finally has a house and family of her own (yes!), she sees no problem in running downstairs, husband and daughter in tow, to view the moonlight and to enjoy the cool breeze at 2 a.m. The view *is* ever so much better downstairs.

They’re a small family, and both parents look far too young to have a child of their own. Too young, too innocent, too unscathed by war. There are wounds of course – Strife never leaves anyone completely unscathed, not even one-year-old Rose Potter, who’s learnt how to say *“Mummy scared, Daddy scared”* months ago – but a look at these two bright faces will reveal no secrets.

James Potter has his arm looped casually around his wife's shoulders. His hazel eyes glow with life and vitality behind his round glasses. Only a second glance at his right hand, resting on Lily's left shoulder, exposes the absence of a thumb. Lily holds her one-year-old daughter tightly, her long, auburn hair falling down her shoulders. Her almond-shaped eyes are fascinatingly beautiful, exquisite and emerald-green, made for sonnets to be written to. They draw away attention from the fine lines that frame her mouth and her forehead, creased like an old woman's.

An owl hoots in the darkness, and they hear unseen wings beating softly towards them, slicing through the stillness of the autumn night. The young man and woman change completely in that instant – Lily's face turns as white as stone, her mouth pressing into a thin, taut line, while James' hand dips into his pocket for his wand. But they relax – just a little, but still – when they see the silvery-white eagle owl that sweeps towards them. Lily's face is still white, but her mouth softens and James, after a moment of hesitation, reaches out for the letter, wandless.

"It's only Laucia," he says, trying to reassure her though his voice is as strained as her face. "I'm sure it's nothing, no danger at all, just old Padfoot..."

The owl swoops and a piece of parchment falls at their feet. Laucia apparently has other letters to deliver, for, without pausing to rest, she flies away into the night like a phantom. James bends down and picks up the parchment, angling it towards the moonlight, away from Lily. He reads it and turns white a second later, the parchment fluttering loosely down again from his trembling fingers.

"What is it?" Lily cries, catching the parchment. "What's the matter..." she begins, scanning through the brief contents of the parchment, and then stopping, with a soft, "Oh."

There is silence for a moment in the beautiful moonlit garden. Then suddenly, a shriek of jubilation bursts from James' lips as he catches up his wife and plants a firm, solid kiss on her lips, drawing both wife and daughter into a strong embrace.

*James and Lily,*

*Got the news from Moody two minutes ago. Frank and Alice found dead. Dark Mark overhead house. Neville still alive. Dumbledore says You-Know-Who dead. For good. Start celebrating.*

*Sirius*

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Rose Potter was bored. It didn't take much for her to be bored, really. She'd expected that the wedding, that of her godmother Mary MacDonald to Reg Cattermole, would bore her within an hour. Forty-five minutes into the ceremony however she felt ready to stomp on the train of her ornately-beaded pink flower-girl's dress.

That was another thing. She *hated* pink, it made her feel like a pig 'cause pigs were pink (atleast when they were clean and in illustrations in storybooks).

"I am dismally bored," she said quietly to a snail crawling on the ground. She felt proud of herself – how many five-year-olds knew the meaning of dismal? None of course, she was willing to bet. Except her wonderful self of course.

"*Dismally*," she repeated with relish, getting up and stomping on the snail. Snails were beautifully stompable, just like grasshoppers and cockroaches; people in France ate them Uncle Padfoot had told her.

She was about to refill her plate – she liked fried lettuce – when a small boy caught her eye. Rose liked small boys nearly as much as she liked small girls – nearly, but not quite. There were very few small girls in Godric's Hallow – only Hannah Abbott who was nearly six and acted as if she were sixteen and a few Muggle girls who had never *heard* of Bertie Botts' Every Flavor Beans. Abandoning her plate – Mummy could always make fried lettuce at home – she wove through the crowd of adults to the little boy with a round face and brown hair.

"Hello," she said introducing herself politely like Mummy had taught her. "I'm Rose Potter. Who're you?"

The boy eyed her disdainfully, looking surprised that she didn't know his name. "I'm the boy who *lived*," he announced. "Neville Longbottom. *Everybody's* heard of *me*."



## ***Mourning Memories***

*It changed the future... and it changed us. It taught us that we have to create the future... or others will do it for us. It showed us that we have care for one another, because if we don't, who will? And that true strength sometimes comes from the most unlikely places. Mostly, though, I think it gave us hope... that there can always be new beginning ... even for people like us.*

### **Babylon 5 - "Sleeping in Light"**

*October 31, 1985.*

Seven years ago they'd all posed for a group photograph, when the Order of the Phoenix had been at its peak – or what James, as an eighteen-year-old initiate to the Order, had been told was it's peak strength. The Order had originated six years before he joined, with nine members. Over the years, the numbers had risen and dipped, until they reached their peak in 1978, with thirty-nine members.

Three years later, there had only been twenty-three. Twenty-three left to celebrate the fall of the Dark Lord and the triumph of the Boy-who-Lived. Mourning had been put off for celebration, then. Fireworks had been bought again and set off in the most far-flung areas, illuminating up the darkness with their dazzling, transient light, bottles of champagne aging patiently in the wine-cellars finally uncorked, caresses that had been put off for too long finally exchanged between scented satin sheets. Children had wandered through the shops of Diagon Alley without wary-eyed, harried parents protectively clutching their hands, wondering at the colorful cacophony they had never seen before, the hustle-and-bustle that had not reigned in the streets for years. Laughter too, ringing sweet and clear, untainted by fear – chiller, yes, than it should have been, from pain of memories so fresh – beautiful and spontaneous.

Cliché. Beautiful, but cliché.

*The most beautiful things in the world are seldom novel,* Mother had once said absently to him, toying with the dull golden ring she'd inherited from her own mother and which she playfully called her

'signet ring'. *The fairytale element is what makes them so beautiful. Cliché, you say. I prefer to think of it as classic.*

*Bourgeoisie propaganda, Mrs. Potter*, sixteen-year-old Sirius had told her gravely, – forgetting he was entirely dependent on her for food and shelter – peering up from *Das Kapital*. Sirius had gone through many... odd phases in the twenty-five odd years of his life. Supporting Marxism had been one of the slightly tamer ones. *Almost all roads lead to capitalism, ma'am. You don't want to be ensnared in their net of false promises and exploitation – support the workers of the world!*

He'd actually *said* that. The more fanatic he'd been about any of his ideas – howsoever ill-informed – the less coherent he'd been.

Tonight they took another picture. Twenty-three people, last time. Thirty people, this time.

The four older children – those who were able to stand on their own – squatted at the front. Six-year-old Rose Potter with her wide smile and missing teeth, five-year-old Alan Bode with his meditative frown and cherubic face, four-year-old Laurence Podmore with his heavy square jaw and thick straw-colored hair, and three-year-old Eric Meadows, his tongue sticking out in the photo.

Rose Potter, who would never see any of her grandparents – except in fading photos and dying memories. Alan Bode, who would not be told, for twelve years, how his mother had died – and even then only in hushed whispers. Laurence Podmore, who would always wonder why – but would never dare ask – his grandmother always set seven plates at the table, even though there were only four members. Eric Meadows, who would always be told his aunt was a great witch because she had the honor to be called out by You-Know-Who himself.

*And Neville Longbottom*, James thought sadly, after smiling and pronouncing the new photograph to be simply 'smashing', and then passing it to Lily for her judgment. The Boy-who-Lived. The boy who would never know his parents.

He watched Rose peer up, mouth wide open, a look of trepidation on her small face, at Alastor Moody. Apparently, Moody's gruff comment, "I don't bite, girly" had done little for Rose's inherent distrust of deep scars and wood-and-glass appendages in place of body parts made of flesh. And then he watched Sirius strut to the middle of the room and – without prelude – strip off his shirt and throw it to pink-cheeked, starry-eyed Hestia Jones.

There are gasps and laughter, catcalls, and shouts of "Bravo!" Without looking at her, James already knows that Lily is rolling her eyes. She's actually very good at doing that – better even than Remus, which is certainly saying something.

*Attention whore*, he thinks, smiling as Sirius slowly revolves on the spot, showing off his truly marvelous physique. And then he gasps when he finds himself facing Sirius' back.

James' mind winds back to that tortuous night, six long years ago. It had been winter then, snow falling anew on blood-stained snow, and they'd been standing in a dark alley – the area practically shimmering with Anti-Apparition Charms – facing three Death Eaters. And he'd wondered – not really wondering, the thought just flitting across his mind in between non-verbal spells, his eyes half-stunned by the flashes of multicolored light that made the alley sparkle – whether he'd live to see the birth of his child.

He'd come off with minor injuries – well, they hadn't exactly been *minor*, as the missing gap in his right hand where a thumb should have been bore testimony to – but Sirius...

A trellis of deep white-and-red scars that *still* looked new and raw and hideous six years later, marred his shoulders and upper arms, meandering down the full length of his back and beyond, coiling over on the other side like a writhing serpent, ending just below his navel. It's almost beautiful in a sickeningly horrific way, heavy, bloody, parasitic vines clustering thickly over mottled yellow skin.

And James' mind creeps to that day again, with all the flying blood, the detached fingers, the wrenching screams, snow flecked with vomit, abdominal fluids and what looked sickeningly like trailing intestines.

*“Ruptured spleen, gall bladder and pancreas. Lacerations in the liver. Extensive blood loss. In short, exceptionally severe penetrating abdominal trauma.”*

*“But he’ll survive, right? You’ll save him, won’t you?”*

*“We’ll do our best, Mr Potter. But you must be prepared for any possibility – understandable complications, you know...”*

But today there’s more than those old wounds, more than just the scars of the past. There are symbols tattooed, in azure blue, shimmering gold, emerald green, coppery red all around the mutilated lattice that is most of his back. To a casual observer they would mean nothing. To the ones who know, they mean everything – a code of bittersweet memories, a touching memorial, and a hard remainder of the steep cost of war at once.

A dog, a wolf, a stag, and a rat at the top. A lily a little below the stag, a rose beside it.

A tree with wide, spreading branches and a lion in full regalia – for Gideon and Fabian Prewett. A Quaffle beneath the tree – for Marlene McKinnon whose body was never found, who died with her lover six days before Halloween, 1981. A spear, for Caradoc Dearborn who suffered the same fate as her, only six months after the original photograph was taken. A radio set nestling close to the spear, for his best friend, Benjy Fenwick, whose body had been retrieved in little pieces, the largest piece his nose. A lithe gazelle, beneath his right shoulder – for brilliant, solitary Dorcas Meadows who died by Lord Voldemort’s wand.

A lynx right next to it – for Kingsley Shacklebolt who’d been engaged to her. A book clearly labeled “Emma, Jane Austen” for stately Emmeline Vance who’d sacrificed her idealistic dreams of life for brutal reality, at the age of fourteen. A barrel of apples for sweet, little Hestia Jones who’d taken out three Death Eaters by herself. A giant soothing a rearing unicorn – for gentle, loyal Hagrid. A sleek cat holding a dictionary and a monocle – for Minerva McGonagall. A goat for Aberforth Dumbledore. A white staff, crowned with buzzing bees for his brother.

And spreading across his lower back, an exquisite aurora borealis. For Alice and Frank.

There are sniffs in the crowd, but applause too as Sirius, cheeks faintly tinged with red, flops down next to James and pulls his shirt over his head. James is about to say it, but Peter beats him to it. “That was a work of art,” he whispers, a note of reverence in his soft voice. Little Rose wanders over to them, cake smeared over her lips, her eyes as wide as saucers.

“Thanks,” Sirius says, grinning goofily and reaching out to wipe the cake smears off of Rose’s mouth. “I spent four hours at Rollick and Jest’s and blew half-a-month’s salary – worth it, isn’t it?”

“It’s ugly,” Rose says earnestly, “it looks *awful*.”

“Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder,” James tells her patiently, quite sure she won’t understand, but telling her all the same. “It isn’t meant to be beautiful, Rosalie – just symbolic...”

“Symbol-ic? What’s that?” Rose demands, pulling herself – somewhat officiously – onto her Daddy’s lap.

At first, James is at a loss for words – *well, honey, symbolic means emblematic, which means representative, which means y’know, um, things which won’t mean anything to you because you haven’t been through that kind of thing – and um, I’ll tell you what that kind of thing is when you’re old enough to understand the concept of a real war with real casualties, not just like in one of those Disney Muggle movies your Mum rents – but it means a whole lot to us, because of...*

While James and Sirius hesitate, Peter speaks up. Affectionately mussing up her hair he says, “They’re like hieroglyphics, Rosie. Those tattoos on his back are whole sentences to us.”

Rose’s face brightens up in perceptive comprehension at once. Hieroglyphics. Ancient Egyptian civilization. Piece of cake for a six-year-old. “What do they mean?” she asks excitedly.

“Sorrow, guilt, repentance,” Peter says very quietly.

“Remembrance, courage, faith,” Sirius says very softly – softly, that is, for him.

James thinks for a while, unsure of what to say. Rose prods him impatiently and demands, “Well?”

Finally he finds his tongue and answers slowly, trying to make the words mean something to her who has never experienced pain or sorrow, who has no lingering shames weighing on her conscience, enveloped always in love and security. “The price of war,” he says, “The fact that we’ll, all of us, always be tainted, wounded by those old memories, no matter how long we live. But also the fact that we can, all of us, build a better world, if we just try... and that the world isn’t such a bad place, that there’s beauty still left – that there’ll *always* be beauty left, no matter how dark it seems... and that’s what it, um means to me.”

There is silence for a moment, and James looks at his friends – at the faint scar on Sirius’ throat, which enlarges into a tangled cobweb of scars down his back, at the permanent worry-lines that crease Peter’s forehead, which have been permanent ever since he turned twenty, at the glints of silver in his golden hair though he is only twenty-five. His eyes stray across the room to indomitable Lily cradling Harry in her arms, her slim figure straight, unbending as always. At Remus (of the newly repaired nose), sipping wine and chatting with Emmeline. At Emmeline herself, her silk gloves on as usual, to cover up her lovely hands, laced with a fine, stiff mesh of white-and-pink lesions.

Survivors all. Some by skill, some by sheer, dumb luck. But survivors, all the same.

And for a moment, guilt stabs like an icy knife through his heart. He does not deserve to live, to enjoy the ephemeral beauty of life – not at the cost of the lives of others. The lives, that for a moment, he feels as if he has personally taken.

“Brilliant, mate,” Sirius says, a grin cracking over his handsome face. “I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“Good enough to add to our official list of wisecracks,” Peter smiles. “What do you think Rosie?”

“Um...?” Rose frowns thoughtfully, and then her face clears up with a bright smile. “It sounds like Keats!”

And finally James smiles, because he knows that Rose does not have the faintest idea who – or what – Keats is, but likes the name. And his heart lightens, because this is life and the littlest things can make the biggest changes. And though Rose has said nothing particularly out of the ordinary or preposterously entertaining, she is drawing stick figures absently on his knuckles with her little fingers and her breath on his neck is very warm – and chocolate-scented, but that’s beyond the point.

And it makes him feel better because even though he might not deserve to live and enjoy life, he is still *living* and maybe... maybe he does deserve to live after all. Maybe he’s here for a good reason.

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Bellatrix Lestrange had not seen the light of day for four-and-a-half years. She’d been incarcerated, cut off from reality, in her husband’s castle since the fall of the Dark Lord. Well, not *completely* cut off. She had had to attend her own trial of course, to prove her innocence – *The Ministry vs. Lestrange*, one of a series of trials called against rumored Death Eaters, by the Wizengamot in full strength no less. But of course she’d been under Rodolphus and Lucius’ Imperius Curse then.

It had been a very powerful Curse – sometimes she wondered whether other people had been involved in casting the curse on her, it really seemed too strong for only two wizards – because the last thing she could remember before her internment was Cissy’s Halloween masque at Malfoy Manor, 1981.

For the past four-and-a-half years, the only people she’d seen had been Rodolphus, Lucius, Cissy and little Draco, Mother and Aunt Walburga.

She grimaced, running her fingers through her coarse black hair and surveying her immaculately furnished, underground chamber disdainfully. At first she’d screamed, broken things, tried throttling anyone who came near her – acted in general like a spoiled child who

wanted a toy but couldn't get it. Then she'd resorted to haughty silence and refusing to eat.

She'd gone five whole days without food, actually before Aunt Walburga had arrived and convinced – more like, ordered – her to eat.

*"You foolish, foolish girl! A pathetic weakling just like your pretty little mother aren't you? A mere ornament, nothing more – that's what you are! Quite unfit to bear the name of Black! Cease this foolishness, Bellatrix, right now."*

*"No."*

She'd been too weak, too famished to utter more than that monosyllable, lying on her bed, her long black hair spread over the plump white pillows. She'd returned her aunt's narrowed glare coldly, and once she'd found enough strength, she'd begun to talk again.

*"Keeping secrets from me, are you not, Aunt? It is about the Dark Lord, is it not? Is he displeased with me?"*

Walburga Black had returned her cold look, but with something akin to pity in her eyes. *"He is gone, Bellatrix."* And then, in a few short, hard words she'd explained everything to her niece – how a mere infant had defeated the greatest of men (no, he was more than a man, something far greater) over a year ago, how she, Bellatrix, had stood for trial with her husband and brother-in-law and betrayed her master with her lies.

Bellatrix could still remember how she'd felt – derisive. She'd actually laughed, weak though she was then. *"That is quite impossible, Aunt Walburga. He cannot be gone. You have been lied to – or else you wish to spare me. He is angry with me. What have I done wrong?"*

Aunt Walburga had laughed then, her laugh as derisive as Bellatrix's. *"You are not a child, Bellatrix. Why should I care to spare you from reality? Look into my eyes, Bellatrix Black Lestrangle, and tell me that I am lying. He is gone."*

She'd looked and after one wild scream, she'd been composed enough to say, *"Then I shall die too."*



*“What a child you are yet, my dear! What will your death profit anyone? Are your convictions not strong enough to buoy you now? You have said countless times that he is more than a man. That he cannot die. Do you still believe so?”*

*“But you said...”*

*“Do you still believe so?”*

*“I... yes. Yes, I do.”*

*“But he is gone, I said.”* There'd been a malicious light in her eyes as she'd smiled. *“Am I lying?”*

Bellatrix had smiled softly, and without pause said, *“You are mistaken, then. He cannot die – he is still alive. Perhaps not in a corporeal form – yes, that’s it. To the uninitiated he might seem dead – but... yes, I am quite sure he is still alive. He must be.”* She'd sat up straighter and accepted the vial her aunt had offered. She drained the contents in one gulp – a concoction to settle her stomach – and then accepted a bowl of fruit. Hungrily, she'd bitten into a large, green apple, forgetting all propriety in her famishment. *“Thank you, Auntie.”*

Aunt Walburga. The wind beneath her wings.

The next step should logically have been attempting to secure her freedom. But freedom came with a price.

Unbreakable Vows.

*“My darling, don’t pout. It does not become you at all. You deserve what you term ‘freedom’ as much as I do my fortune – not at all. If I could just procure a suitable certificate, I would have you shut up permanently in St. Mungo’s. Seeing as those certificates are rather hard to come by – unfairly, I mean – you must be content with these quarters for the remainder of your life. Or at least until you come into your right senses of course.”*

*“Right senses? You fool, let me go! What am I to you? Rodolphus, we shall be favored above all when the Dark Lord comes into power*

*again! We must find him again, restore him – it is our duty, our honor!”*

*“He will never come back if I can help it. I’m an old man, Bellatrix, and I have neither time nor inclination – nor come to think of it, money – to go about chasing specters. Your notions are as foolish as they are idealistic.”*

*“Do you mean to say that you do not desire his return then?”*

*“Not quite – no, I wouldn’t go that far. But you see, I like the quiet life and it would be rather hard to maintain such a peaceful lifestyle if the Dark Lord ever...”*

*“You coward!”*

*“Cowards live longer than fools and fanatics. It’s a good life, this, and I have no wish to lose it.”*

*“What does that have to do with my freedom?”*

*“Everything, my love. I grant that you’re beautiful and er, vivacious – but you must admit yourself that you are rather a fool. And fools in the family do lead to ever so much trouble... I really can’t have my wife scurrying all over the country searching for imaginary Dark Lords. Most unsuitable. Not to add, quite hazardous considering the present political climate. Anti-Dark-Lord is quite in this season, you know.”*

*“I despise you.”*

*“Come now, don’t scowl. You’ll get wrinkles before your time – there, darling, I’ll buy you a pretty new garnet pendant. Won’t that make you happy?”*

She’d lashed out at him with her fists but he’d laughed and lightly sidestepped her – before casting *Impedimenta* at her.

Three Unbreakable Vows.

*"You must promise never to seek the Dark Lord again. You must promise never to aid or abet others in seeking him. You must promise never to voice a word about our activities from 1968 till 1981."*

*"I refuse."*

*"Then you refuse your freedom."*

Three vows she could never bring herself to pledge.

*"You are a fool, Bellatrix."*

*"My daughter, do you really call yourself a Slytherin?"*

*"Bella, please!"*

Not for aunt. Not for mother. Not for sister.

She loved them. She missed the long winter nights, when sleep would not come, and Aunt Walburga and she would sit by the fireside and speak of power and allegiance, of blood and unspeakable curses. She missed the twilights before balls when Mother would straighten her robes, kiss her knuckles and tell her that she was beautiful. She missed the drowsy summer afternoons when Cissy would creep into her room and lie down beside on her bed, whispering in her sweet voice of love and lovers.

But she could not give in for them. Aunt. Mother. Sister. They were important to her. But he was more important than all three of them.

She could never betray them. How could she betray him, whom she held dearer than all three of them together?

*"I cannot."*

**000**

"St. Elde's Palace," Rose read from the leaflet and glanced up at the colossal stone edifice in front of her. *"Bringing the past into the present."*

“Welcome, My Lady,” a brightly-smiling, young woman in a figure-hugging, jade gown with a trailing skirt and cream-colored wimple said, curtsying prettily. “Here, at St. Elde’s Palace, our only aim is to make your stay as pleasant as possible – to bring the past back into the present! My Lord, Your Ladyship?”

“You’re fat,” Rose said calmly, putting down her leaflet and scrunching up her face disdainfully. “And my name’s *Rose* – not Lady. And don’t call me yours either.”

The young woman’s smile faded slightly, but Lily was quick to remedy the situation with a sharp, “*Behave*” for her daughter and an apology to the hostess. “I’ll go and freshen up, then,” she said, shifting her hold on Harry. “It’s too cold for you to go exploring now – you’d better come up too.”

James looked about him, breathing in the chilly, pine-scented air, old memories flooding back. He’d been Rose’s age when he’d been here last. “In a while,” he said softly, putting his hand gently on his daughter’s shoulder. “I’ll just show her around a bit...”

“Been here before, sir?” the young woman smiled ingratiatingly. “We’re delighted that you’ve chosen St. Elde’s Palace again, over any other...”

“I don’t like it,” Rose said snootily, throwing an irate glare at her. “What if that palace falls over? It isn’t even made of *cement* – we’re all gonna be crushed if it does fall over and then what’s going to happen?”

“How sweet!” the young woman cooed. Her face clearly said, *And I certainly hope that you do get crushed, you little brat!*

“Mmm... come along, Rosalie,” James said, taking Rose’s hand and leading her away. He found an ancient-looking stone bench in a fairly secluded spot and sat down.

“I’m not sitting on that,” Rose said, looking disgustedly at the moss-covered stone. “It’s got bird poop on it.”

"They only have stone benches at Hogwarts," James told her gravely. "You'd better get used to it now."

"I hate this place," Rose repeated again. "It doesn't even have proper benches – I mean they don't cost that much. I hate that woman – she looks like she's just *begging* for a dragon to snatch her up so her Prince Charming can save her. Ugh."

"This would have been yours," James interrupted her, running his fingers over the roughly-hewn stone bench. Cunningly wrought though it was, he could tell that it had been manufactured less than thirty years ago. Pity – there used to be a few real benches that Father assured him were over seven hundred years old around. "Yours and Harry's – it would have been all yours and you'd have had to love it."

"Mine?" Rose asked him confusedly. "It's a hotel, Daddy."

"It wasn't always a hotel," he said softly, gazing at a slender tree half-bent under the weight of a thousand pearly-white blossoms. "There's a reason I brought you here, Rosalie. Why don't you sit down and I can tell you the story?"

Rose shook her head and refused to sit. But James told her the story anyway. "We used to be a thousand times richer than we are now," he said dreamily, trying to remember the words Mother had told him when he'd once asked her why they never visited the old palaces. "Hundreds of years ago we had our private armies, courts even. We were wealthy enough to bribe kings. We had castles and fortresses scattered over the Continent. That's the way Purebloods used to live five, four hundred years ago – we'd gathered so much wealth over the years, because we were more powerful than the Muggles. That was Pre-Seclusion, of course – didn't Mum tell you about Seclusion?"

"All the wizards kind of went into hiding around the 1700s," Rose said. "Because they were scared that the Muggles might find out their secrets and then they'd all be killed because there were more Muggles than wizards."

"We used to depend on land and manpower, Pre-Seclusion," James said dreamily. "Agriculture that is – I mean, farming. Post-Seclusion

where would the manpower come from? We'd cut off all our ties with the Muggles, who provided most of the manpower. And that's when everyone who was rich started to become poor and those who used to be poor, started becoming richer. Our sources of income were... curtailed. We should have looked for more means of income – well, wise people did that, actually, but most people aren't wise. They spent as much as they did, Pre-Seclusion, and slowly – because they didn't attempt to earn money – their fortunes started dwindling. Decreasing. Becoming smaller. Do you understand?"

Rose nodded.

"The Blacks were smart – yes, I mean your Uncle Padfoot's family," James continued. "And the Malfoys, Lestranges, and Greengrasses too – even smarter. But most other families – the Fairbairns, the Gaunts, the Weasleys, the Potters... well, we weren't that smart. Your Grandfather Charlus inherited a palace – this one, in fact – and not much else. He was too poor to afford first-hand textbooks at Hogwarts."

"He became the Professor of Ancient Runes at Hogwarts, right?" Rose said brightly. "And Grandmother Dorea used to take his classes and they fell in love and got married."

*That implies an inappropriate student-teacher relationship,* thought James. "Well, not exactly like that – I mean, yes, he was the Professor and she did take his classes and they did get married but... well, that's about it."

"They didn't love each other?" Rose asked puzzled.

"Well, no – I mean, er, yes. Yes, they did," James said quickly and then frowned. "Not really, it was more of a marriage of convenience – I mean, um, they liked each other, but they didn't really love each other, and they were both sort of old and they thought it was best to get married before they got older and er..." He stopped feebly, knowing that he wasn't making a great case for either of his parents. "They were fond of each other," he finished, thinking of his Mother, buried at the Fortress of Lockwind – the traditional Black estate – and of his Dad, whose mangled body they'd cremated.

“Why isn’t this place yours, then?” Rose asked, reverting back to the original topic. “Did you sell it to the hotel-people or something?”

James grinned. “That’s exactly what we did – I mean, more like Mother did. After they got married, he stopped teaching – he was pretty old too, then. Mother left her job too...”

“Why?” Rose demanded. “I mean, Mummy’s married to you, but she has a job too.”

“Your Mummy writes books and for magazines,” James reminded her. “Pretty loose timetable – she can juggle you two and me and her job easily. But Mother worked at one of the bureaus of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, the Unit of Advanced Research on Magical Creatures. Plenty of field-work involved. And besides, she was sort of well, you might say old-fashioned. She was a Black, you know, and she’d been brought up to think that a woman shouldn’t work after marriage – tripe all of that, of course, but then it’s pretty much impossible to escape your upbringing and stop believing what you were taught to believe as a child. And no, Uncle Padfoot doesn’t count – he’s an exception.”

“Exception?”

“Didn’t follow the rules, though don’t ask me why. Maybe because he was Sorted into Gryffindor, maybe because he was always rebellious. Non-conformist. He hated the rules – he still does, doesn’t he?”

Rose grinned and nodded. “I like that about him,” she said firmly. “I want to be just like him when I’m big, too.”

James chuckled and mussed her hair fondly. “For that you’d need a sex-change operation, but never mind. Lets get back on with our story. Well, after they’d gone through Mother’s dowry there wasn’t much left to live on, so Mother made a pretty smart move in selling this palace because it was kind of useless. To Muggles, no less because they pay more and have less palaces than us – well you can guess how much we got for it.”

“How much?” Rose asked interestedly. “A lot?”

“A Queen’s ransom,” James grinned. “In Galleons it’d be... uh, let’s see... yes, I think about thirty-five thousand Galleons. Think about that, Rosalie.”

Rose’s eyes widened and she gasped. “No kidding!”

“How many ancient palaces go up for sale everyday, do you think?” James smiled. “And it was in pretty good shape too, considering that it’s over seven hundred years old. Well worth the price, I’d say. And then Mother did another smart thing too – she invested most of the money in the market.”

“The *market*?”

“Stocks and things – I’ll explain later. Not the Wizarding Exchange either – the Muggle one. More money to be gained that way,” James said. “That’s why we’re so well off now, Rose – we’re living on the interest and bonds and all that messy stuff that I’ll have to teach you later. It’s a huge sum too.”

“You paid a palace for all that much money,” Rose pointed out. “Your last palace.”

“Dad wasn’t too happy with her move,” James grinned.

“Why? You got more money didn’t you?”

“Yes...” James said softly, gazing up at the mighty palace again. *This might still have been mine.* “But there’s this little thing called nostalgia, Rose. Family pride. It’s stupid, it’s elitist, I know. But... I can’t stop thinking about how we used to come here and how the house-elves would be so pleased. We once had a costume ball here, when I was six – it was grand. I met your Uncle Padfoot there – well, we didn’t exactly hit it off there. He hurled a vat of pumpkin juice at me because he said I was looking at him funny. I did my best to break his nose, of course – had to. And I was thinking that this is our last link with the past that’s dying.

A society, a culture that’s on its last legs, withering away like those flowers on the ground. That’s why all those Purebloods joined forces with Lord Voldemort – they were trying to get back their old power.



There aren't many rich, powerful Pureblood families left – the Blacks are all gone, the Greengrasses are almost gone, the Lestranges are selling off their vineyards so they can afford their castles, the Rookwoods have lost their power and the Rosiers the purity of their blood. The Malfoys are the only family I can think of, out of the top of my head, who still fit the old clichés of power and wealth being associated with blood status."

"I don't understand," Rose said, frowning. "How can a family die? What do elitist and cliché mean?"

James sighed. "A family dies when there are no members left – or those members just let go of their old family traditions. Like Uncle Padfoot doesn't like his family and he doesn't go with any of the old family traditions. Elitist means thinking you're superior to other people." He remembered how Mother had looked at Lily the first time she'd seen her. *Very charming*, she'd said, the barest trace of a French accent in her soft voice, a pretty smile on her face. But her eyes had been cold, condemning as she'd surveyed Lily who'd been fidgeting restlessly. *A Mudblood to marry my son?* Mother, the sweetest and loveliest mother he could have ever hoped for. Well, old habits died hard and she would never – could never – forget that she had been born a Black. A princess.

"And cliché means the same thing over again." Just like her son could never shake off the fact that he was half-a-Black on her side, and a Potter besides that. That his wife was a Muggle-born – even though he loved her with his whole heart and more than his whole heart too. Padfoot was the non-conformist. Prongs would always be the conformist, clinging to fading mores that had no place in his life.

Potter.

The word still meant something more to him.

**A/N: Why, yes, there are real meanings behind most of the tattoos Sirius' back, based on name meanings, popular fanon and some canon extra-information. If anybody's interested, PM me and I'll spill all that oh-so carefully gathered trivia. And yes, before anyone accuses me of plagiarism, the first part of this**

chapter was inspired by Lady Altair's fic "Cauterize". Inspired.  
Not flagrantly plagiarized.

## ***The Boy who Lived***

*Our firmest convictions are apt to be the most suspect, they mark our limitations and our bounds. Life is a petty thing unless it is moved by the indomitable urge to extend its boundaries.*

**— Jose Ortega y Gasset**

*Tick-tick, tick-tock, tick-tick, tick-tick-TOCK.* The little clock shaped like a Kneazle crowed ten o'clock from the top of the bureau. It was far past her bedtime, but Mummy wasn't up telling her to go to sleep. It took a lot of time to get little Harry to fall asleep and Mummy usually fell asleep in the process.

So, after making a face at the clock, Rose Potter curled up underneath the blankets and resumed her drawing of a dragon. It was a good dragon, she decided, just a little tame-looking. She added big bright yellow fangs and several red-and-green stripped horns and decided that it looked silly. A scaly purple tail later she decided it looked fat. She cut through its underbelly with a pair of scissors and finally decided that it looked like a proper dragon. Just a bit too colorful, Mummy would say. Oh well – colorful dragons were the only really pretty ones. Maybe they weren't the most vicious – Hungarian Horntails were pretty much the meanest dragons around, only they were ugly and scaly – but they were the prettiest, and besides, it was only a picture.

She yawned and put her pretty picture on the desk. *I'll get Daddy to help me stick it to my door tomorrow – there's no place on the walls now.* Her walls were practically swathed in pictures of particularly vicious beasts. She looked at the Kneazle-shaped clock on the bureau and frowned, trying to guess what the time was. She was bad at telling time. Mummy had taught her how to tell time a thousand times – and she *still* hadn't learned. Sometimes she felt a little guilty that she was too stupid to learn, but then consoled herself with the thought that not everyone could be smart like Jessica Marten or Neil Gladstone. *Some people just have to be dumb, so other people can be smart.*

It was around ten-thirty, she guessed, since she wasn't quite sure. Time to go to bed – Mummy might wake up any moment now and

check on her and she'd get mad, red-mad like Daddy said, if she saw her awake. But she didn't *want* to go to sleep in her own room – plastered with pictures of Nundus and dragons, some copied from books, others cut from magazines and imaginary animals like flesh-eating unicorns, inspired from Uncle Padfoot's gory bedtime stories. She had a hard time falling asleep in her own room if Mummy or Daddy didn't put her to bed – she was always scared that one day the pictures would come to life and reach out and slash her throat while she was sleeping...

Tonight it was so quiet and dark that it was just too easy to believe the pictures on the wall were alive, just waiting for her to turn off the light and crawl into bed so they could carve up her heart and chew off her ears...

She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. *That's not real, it can't happen, I'm a big girl now...*

The wind rustled in the trees and her resolve to stay in the room like a big girl broke down instantaneously. *I'm not a coward*, Rose thought defiantly. *I just want to sleep next to Mummy tonight...*

That was a good idea, actually.

She'd just go curl up next to Mummy and when Daddy came home, he could carry her to her room later so she'd wake up in the morning without having to look at her pictures at night. Sometimes her pictures scared her and she didn't want to admit that to Mummy because the pictures were *pretty* too (even if they were a bit scary) and she didn't want Mummy to take them down. Mummy's ideas of the pictures that should be pinned to the walls of little girls' bedrooms were just... stupid. Unicorns with sparkly horns, graceful ballerinas, princesses in long, pink dresses... *yuck*.

She gathered up her fat, purple-and-yellow dragon plushy and, after casting a last nervous glance at the walls, walked out of the room. She just couldn't turn off the lights – then the whole house would be dark and you never knew what things could reach out and just grab you in the dark... no, it was better not to think about that kind of stuff.

Her parents' bedroom was just beyond the landing and she was padding there, her dragon plushy clutched tightly, when she saw light filtering out from the drawing room. Curious – maybe Daddy had come back – she crept closer to the balustrade and strained her eyes to see something. You could just about see the drawing room from in between the railings. What was Daddy doing downstairs? Maybe she could get him to tuck her into bed – that would be nice.

She listened carefully and heard the low rise and fall of voices, but even though she strained her earsA she was nervous or worried or scared. Tonight, she was all three – and it didn't help that the hallway was dark and she could still hear the wind rustling in the trees. Or was it just the wind? Couldn't it be...

But then, a very loud voice interrupted her thoughts, and made her jump and nearly fall down the stairs. "Merlin's *pants*, Prongs, there's no way they'll catch her!"

She scrambled down the stairs, confused but interested, wondering where the conversation was headed towards. It was better being closer to Daddy and Uncle Padfoot – though they might send her to bed alone and she didn't want to admit she was scared to go to sleep without being tucked up – than up in the dark hallway.

Maybe 'her' was Uncle Padfoot's girlfriend – Rose liked his girlfriends, they were all so pretty and dumb and he changed them every other week. When she'd told him that Mummy didn't like him changing his women so often he'd laughed and called her his real girlfriend. She liked that.

"There's no way she'll find her target either, Padfoot. Be reasonable," Daddy sounded very reasonable himself. *I know what reasonable means*, she thought proudly. She knew lots of words that the other kids in her class didn't – but that was because of Uncle Padfoot, of course, who always liked to use long words. "What's the worst she could do?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe slaughter a round hundred Muggles, torture every Muggle-born in the country into insanity, and worm her way up into the currently vacant position of immortal Dark Lord?" Uncle

Padfoot sounded furious that Daddy was so reasonable. "You're taking this too lightly, James. It's a serious matter."

"Of course it is. Serious people – like me, for instance – are looking into it. Calm down, Pads – either the Ministry or Dumbledore will catch her. She's your cousin; you of all people should know she'd never be content to lie low for the rest of her life."

"She can cause a lot of damage simply lying low," Uncle Padfoot said roughly. "Who's to say she isn't targeting the poster-boy of the side of light, complete with Muggle-born bride and his sidekick, the renegade son of the House of Black? Maybe she isn't looking to reestablish up the old order of general evil-ness but start a new one."

"I'm sure it'll be a cinch, the recruiting process I mean," Daddy said thoughtfully. "A woman on the run for several particularly bloody murders, her credentials are definitely genuine. *Hi! I'm Bellatrix Lestranger nee Black, ex-lover of You-Know-Who and I like killing things and laughing manically. I'll sleep with you if you're nasty enough. Wanna join my gang?*"

His voice came out high-pitched and girly and, after a pause, Uncle Padfoot let out a bark of laughter. "That wasn't even *funny*. Really, you ought to be ashamed of yourself James Potter. You're getting old."

"He's only twenty-five," Rose protested, flouncing into the drawing room, feeling that she must protest against this unfair comment. "And *you're* twenty-six."

Daddy and Uncle Padfoot stared at her, mouths hanging open. Daddy quickly shut his because Mummy always told him off for doing that. "Did you hear everything?" Uncle Padfoot whispered, as Daddy's face slowly turned grey.

"Yes," Rose said proudly, enjoying the effect of her words on her father and godfather. Belatedly, she realized that they might send her up to bed alone, and her smile faded a bit.

"*Everything?*" Daddy whispered.

Better to enjoy her time downstairs – maybe Uncle Padfoot would tuck her in if she asked nicely enough, without laughing at her. That would be nice. She nodded cheerfully. “Bellatrix Lestrange nee Black was You-Know-Who’s girlfriend and she likes killing people.”

“Not just girlfriend but also his sex sl–” Uncle Padfoot began but was quelled by the look Daddy shot him.

“And she’s on the run for doing something that involves killing?” Rose suggested, though she wasn’t quite sure of that part.

“Not just killing but also–” Uncle Padfoot began but Daddy groaned loudly and he shut up. “What?” Uncle Padfoot protested. “She’s got to stay in touch with reality, James – you can’t molycoddle her forever.”

“She’s *five*,” Daddy said crossly, like Rose was a little baby.

“Five and almost a half!” Rose protested. “And I’m not a little baby either – I’m a big girl, and I’ve got to stay in touch with reality, just like Uncle Padfoot said!” She nodded sagely though she hadn’t understood what he’d meant.

“Fine ally you have there,” Daddy said sourly. “Now she’ll be pestering us to tell her everything for the next few months. And she’ll tell Lily too.”

“Oh...” Uncle Padfoot’s wicked grin faded a little. “Um, Rose would you mind not mentioning this to your mother? It’s kind of well, er, official, and um, you shouldn’t worry your Mummy with stuff like that, so it’d be really good if you’d...”

“Stop blabbering – you sound like a demented owl,” Daddy said. *Note to self: Sirius bad influence on the kids. Keep away from Rose and Harry as much as possible.*

“Sour grapes much?”

“I have a *reason* to be,” Daddy said, looking aggravated. “It’s our job hunting for her, isn’t it? Don’t you think I have the right to be stressed out? This is going to mean months and months of paperwork and background-checking and glaring at alibis.”

Rose settled down on a sofa, comfortably. She liked the annoyed look on Daddy's face – it looked so funny. "Poor you."

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed now?" Uncle Padfoot asked suddenly, glancing at the clock. "It's ten-thirty and..."

"No!" Rose said instantly. "I don't want to go to bed in my room."

"Scared?" Uncle Padfoot teased.

"No!" Rose said, annoyed instead of scared now. "I'm not a baby and..."

"Oooh, I'm so..."

"Oh, shut up, both of you!" Daddy snapped, massaging his forehead, a weary look on his face. "I mean..." he sighed tiredly when Uncle Padfoot and Rose both shot him hurt looks. "Stop the puppy-dog eyes act, please? God, Sirius, stop behaving like a five-year-old."

"I am one at heart."

Rose giggled and Daddy scowled. "Ha ha ha, very funny. We have work to do, you and I. And *you*, Miss Rose Iris should have been up to bed long ago. An hour ago, in fact."

"But I don't want to go to bed in my room!" Rose said earnestly. "Not that I'm scared or anything, just..."

"Have a heart," Uncle Padfoot said seriously. "Look at the poor kid, all frightened..."

"Hey!"

"Will you *please* stop ganging up on me? God, it's like I'm in charge of a bevy of *four*-year-olds. You don't want to go up to bed in your room, Rose? Fine then. I'll just take you up to Mummy and Uncle Padfoot here will take the time to remember that you are five years old, as of now, and that there is no need for him to go into the details of Madam Lestranger's wild orgies. *Won't* he?" Daddy picked Rose up. He sounded very much like Mummy.



Uncle Padfoot quelled instantly at Daddy's glance and threw up his hands, yawning widely. "Sorry, mate," he said when his yawn had subsided. "I guess I'm a bad influence on her, aren't I?"

"You most certainly are."

"But I like that!" Rose protested, wrapping her arms around Daddy's neck. Not to strangle him or anything, just to tighten her grip on him.

"Most people generally like bad influences," Uncle Padfoot smiled. "And no, James, I did not pick that up from Wilde. I like the man's stories – I'm not mad about him. Well, not entirely, I mean."

"I wasn't implying anything," Daddy said, looking sulky. "Don't fall asleep now – I'll be back in a minute."

"Any pudding in the kitchen?"

"No, not..."

"Oh, Mummy made one yesterday!" Rose interrupted. "You can have all of it – I don't like pudding."

Uncle Padfoot's eyes sparkled wickedly. "I love you, darling."

"And I love pudding," Daddy said. "That was my pudding – I bet it'll be gone by the time I'm back."

"Affirmative, Cap'n," Uncle Padfoot said brightly. Daddy just sighed, shook his head, and carried Rose away from the drawing room.

"What's an orgy?" Rose yawned, suddenly feeling tired as Daddy carried her upstairs.

"Ask your mother ten years later," Daddy said wearily. "And *please* don't mention the matter to Uncle Padfoot again. You won't like the answers."

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“Well, you’re up early, aren’t you?” Mummy said absently as Rose wandered into the dining room, yawning at eleven o’clock the next morning.

Rose ignored this pleasantry, opened the refrigerator, and brought out a packet of Every-Flavor Beans. They always had some in the kitchen – it was Rose’s favorite sweet. She settled down next to her mother at the dining table, nibbling on a bean. Warm sunlight filtered in, brightening up the wide, airy room with its vivid yellow walls. The rugs were like gay spots of color daubed on the glistening, tiled floor with blobs of multi-hued paint. Rose took a seat at the table, staring at the table which was almost entirely covered with a large sheet of paper, over which Mummy’s head was bent. Every once in a while, Mummy began to tap her wand on the paper, murmuring incantations under her breath, her forehead scrunched up thoughtfully.

“What’s that?” she asked curiously. The floor-plan of a house was sketched on the sheet. Rose knew what a floor-plan was. Uncle Moony had explained it to her just before he left for Fiji to study Fire Crabs. Uncle Moony’s job was researching Magical Creatures, a project he’d undertaken under Hogwarts’ funding since after the end of the War against Voldemort.

“It’s a floor-plan of the Longbottoms’ house and the enchantments we’re going to place on it,” Mummy said vaguely, not even bothering to explain to Rose – or even look up. “I have to go there this afternoon, Mary’s going to look after Harry and...wait a moment.” Mummy looked up suddenly, her eyes bright, a sweet smile forming on her face. She had the air of one bestowing a giant treat. “Would you like to go there with me today? There’s Neville and the little Weasleys. I’m sure they’d enjoy the company, and of course you’d have a lot of fun too. Why now that I think of it, it’s an excellent idea, isn’t it? That’d be perfect, and then Mary’d have much less work to do too...What do you say, Rose?”

“Neville? Neville Longbottom?” Rose asked cautiously. Mummy’s ‘excellent’ ideas usually turned out to be very, very bad for her.

Mummy nodded, still smiling. Beaming more like it. “It’ll be a lot of fun...” she said coaxingly.

"I do not like Neville Longbottom," Rose said in her stateliest voice, frowning and chewing a strawberry-grass-chili flavored bean. "He is an arrogant boy, full of haughty presumptions."

Mummy blinked at her and rested her hands on the table-top. "Or you could just say he was stuck-up."

"That too," Rose agreed, hoping that she'd managed to convince her mother that it was a Bad idea (with a capital B) to play with Neville Longbottom. "Only Uncle Padfoot told me to use big words." *People take you more seriously if you use bigger words, Rose. Of course there's the minor obstacle that they tend to laugh at you if the word you're using is longer than you are... but aside from that, it's a brilliant concept – using longer words I mean.*

Mummy nodded seriously, but Rose could tell that she was laughing inside. *But I'm longer than any word ever invented! How can a word be longer than me?* "So, you see I can't go. But who're the little Weasleys? Are they nice?" she asked, after she'd finished a raisin-sunflower-seed-rock flavored bean. Not that she wanted to go see them or anything – just that she thought it would be nice to ask a polite question so Mummy wouldn't be too hurt that she'd shot down her 'excellent' idea.

"Ronald and Ginevra," Mummy said, her face suddenly serious. "They're staying with their Great-Auntie Muriel for some time at Augusta Longbottom's place. Listen to me, Rose, I want you to be very nice to them..."

"But I'm not going to meet them!" Rose protested indignantly, between bites of her bean. "I thought we'd already 'greed on that, Mummy!"

Mummy ignored her and continued speaking. Whenever she didn't like something Rose was saying, she either scowled or ignored her. Sometimes she did both. "Yesterday something very sad happened to them. Very sad." Mummy paused so that the words could sink in and bestowed a small scowl on Rose. Rose scowled back. *I am not going. You can't make me.* "They lost their parents and five older brothers," she said quietly. "They were all killed."

“Was it Bellatrix Lestrangle nee Black?” the question popped out before she could stop it, before she could remember that she was supposed to be scowling at Mummy and not asking questions.

Mummy’s eyes narrowed dangerously and she clenched the top of the table hard. “Who told you that, young lady?” she asked very, very softly.

Rose recognized her mother’s red-mad voice instantly and knew that the game was up. Of course she’d promised Uncle Padfoot not to tell and everything, but Mummy could be *scary* when she was really mad... Rose would pick an angry Mummy over a hurt Uncle Padfoot anyday. She quickly told the story, fidgeting restlessly when Mummy’s frown spread until her face seemed like one big scowl. Rose knew it would be better to get over the story quickly and everything, but she couldn’t help but ask her the question that had been bugging her at the end. “And what’s an orgy, by the way? Is it some kind of food? Do you get orgy-flavored Every-Flavor Beans?”

The doorbell rang and Mummy stood up, green eyes glinting. “Just wait till I get my hands on you, Sirius Black,” she hissed, stalking off to usher in Mary MacDonald Cattermole.

Rose looked at her retreating back, puzzled, and reached out for an Every-Flavor Bean. For good measure – to make sure Mummy knew she was absolutely, positively *not* going – she yelled after her, “I’m still not going!”

An evil laugh floated back at her, with the words, “Don’t be too sure of that!”

**000**

“Good afternoon, Lily, and you too, little Miss.” There were two old women in the drawing room they’d Floored to. The one who greeted them was tall and stately and sipping tea. The one opposite to her was plump with red-rimmed eyes and looked like a cranky flamingo.

“Afternoon, Mrs. Longbottom, Mrs. Prewett. No, I’m sorry, I can’t stay for tea – we’ll all be very busy today. Yes, I’ll be working too. I brought my daughter – Rose – today, because I thought the children

could use some company. Rose would love to play with the others.” Mummy nudged her forwards and, unwillingly, Rose plastered a fake smile on her face, so the old ladies could see what a nice little girl she was. Yuck. Mummy practically forced her into coming today – she might just as well have sat at home and stuck the picture of the dragon on her door with Aunt Mary’s help. She would have been a good girl. *Anything* was better than being Floored across the world – it seemed like that to her – with an irate mother, in a frilly pink dress, of all things.

She hated frills. She loathed pink. She detested dresses. Together, all three of them were too much to bear. *Mummy is evil. All she needs is a black cape and a nasty Mwahahahaha laugh and she’ll be all set to rule the world with the power of pink.*

“By the way, could you tell me where Sirius is?”

“Young Black? He’s out in the front garden with your husband I think...” Mrs Longbottom began but Lily stomped out of the room unceremoniously, before she could finish, murder written on her face. “Young girls these days are so impatient,” Mrs. Longbottom sighed to Mrs. Prewett, who nodded sagely. Rose gathered that the young girl being referred to was her mother – not her. That was funny – Mummy was so old and people still called her a young girl.

“You look like such a nice little girl,” Mrs. Longbottom continued, smiling kindly at Rose. “Rose Potter, is it? Lovely name, and you have such a sweet face, my dear. Well what do you think of her, Muriel?”

Muriel sniffed and glared at Rose. “Cat’s eyes,” she said crossly. “And the child’s too thin – has a real mean, starved look about her. I *hope* she’s a nice little girl.” Her tone implied that she was certain that Rose was anything but.

Rose barely restrained herself from making a face at Mrs. Prewett. She just glowered at her sulkily – Mummy would be very angry if she was rude to such an old lady. *Old ladies are stuuuuuuuupid.*

Mrs. Longbottom chuckled and said, “You must excuse her, my dear. She’s always this cross – no personal offense meant. Wait a minute,

Muriel – I'll be back soon. Come along, Rose." Then she took Rose's hand, walked out of the large drawing room paneled in dark wood and marched her through a long gallery full of smiling, brown-eyed portraits, and then up a flight of stairs, plushly carpeted in purple-and-gold. It seemed to be a pretty big house.

"I'm sure your mother's told you about Ronald and Ginevra?" Mrs. Longbottom asked, stopping suddenly at the landing. Rose nodded and the lady sniffed and reached for a dainty, frilly handkerchief, murmuring, "Truly very sad, a tragedy indeed most unexpected... well, you know what to do, don't you? You will be very nice to them?" She looked very anxious, so Rose nodded and mustered up a smile.

"Good girl," Mrs. Longbottom smiled approvingly and patted her head (Rose made sure to wince to show her that she didn't like being patted like a dog). "Very well then... Neville, you have a visitor!"

She threw the door open with a flourish to reveal a large, rather strange room. On one side was pushed a large canopy bed, – upholstered in Gryffindor scarlet and Slytherin emerald – colors which predominated in the airy room. One wall was full of stained-glass windows through which shafts of sunlight filtered, forming multicolored shapes on the stone floor. The other wall was entirely plastered with newspapers – most of them screaming headlines like *'The Boy-who-Lived!'*, *'Our Savior, the Propheted One'*, *'He who hath led us from darkness unto light'*, pictures of the Chosen One himself – and a few photos of what looked like his family members.

There was a huge glass enclosure also, near the bed, next to which Neville Longbottom himself was standing. Well, Rose assumed it was Neville because the person – whose face as turned away from her – had brown hair. She didn't remember how he looked like – it had been a few months since they'd last met – but she did remember that he had brown hair. Not that that made him special or anything – lots and lots of people had brown hair. There were two small red-haired children sitting on the bed – a boy with very short, slightly darker hair and a girl with long flame-red locks. Ignoring Neville disdainfully (who'd looked around when she'd arrived, but then turned back towards his enclosure), Rose headed towards them.

“Hello,” she said, trying to be polite to the little girl – a girl much smaller in size than herself – “What’s your name?”

The girl looked up at her with large, frightened, brown eyes. She didn’t answer, just began to suck her thumb, head cocked to one side studying Rose. “What about you?” Rose said to the boy, deciding that the girl was a bit stupid. She couldn’t see his face, which was tilted towards Neville. He turned towards her at her question and she yelped in surprise. A black skull with a snake coming out from its mouth looked like it had been carved with a *big* knife on his forehead. It was terrifying.

“He’s Ron, and she’s Ginny,” Neville said, without turning around. “That’s Rose Potter. Stop bothering them, Rose.”

“I’m not,” she said sulkily, still recovering from her shock at the sight of the scar. Ron turned his face quickly from her and began to study his fingernails closely. Rose remembered a second too late that it wasn’t nice and polite to gape at strangers like that. “*Loooong-bottom.*”

“Are too,” Neville returned evenly. “Potty Potter.”

“Am not,” she snapped, standing on tip-toes and trying to get another look at Ron’s face without appearing too obvious about it. She could just have walked around and stared at his face – but that would have been un-nice and Mummy and Mrs Longbottom had both told her to be nice. “Mr. Chosen-One.”

“Are *too*. Miss-Boring.”

Rose promptly forgot that she was trying to get another look at Ron’s face. She stopped standing up on tip-toes and put her hands on her hips just like Daddy did when he was angry. She was outraged. She was many things – a faithful worshipper of Bertie’s Beans, someone who took a long time to wake up, fed vegetables to the cat when Mummy wasn’t looking, and used to chew paper before Uncle Wormtail had told her it was un-hygienic (whatever that was) – but she was *not*, she was pretty sure, boring. Or she hoped she wasn’t.

“Least I’m not stuck-up,” she snapped, nose up in the air.

“That’s cause you having nothing to be stuck up *about*,” Neville sniggered. “You’re not *me*.” He turned around suddenly, a long, slender lime green snake coiled around his left forearm. It had the desired effect – Rose screamed and fell down. Ginny gaped at her for a second and then began to clap and giggle, but Ron, toying with the coverlet, said nothing. He didn’t even turn around.

“I can do *lots* of things no one else can,” Neville said smugly, stroking the snake with his right hand. “Cause I’m special, see? Here, watch this.” He began to hiss and spit like Mummy’s cat coughing up a hairball, without pausing to draw breath. He looked like he was concentrating hard, and slowly, the snake began to hiss and spit back at him, and then slipped down to the floor, edging towards Rose.

“Merlin’s *pants*,” Rose screamed like Uncle Padfoot, clambering onto the bed. “Make it stop make it stop!” Ginny had stopped clapping and was eying the snake warily. Ron drew up his legs on the bed, but did nothing else. Like his mind was in another world, disconnected from the happenings of the one in which his body was. “I take everything back – you’re special! You are, you are!” Rose forget everything Uncle Padfoot had told her about being brave, she didn’t want to die before she turned six! *What good will being brave do me if I’m dead?*

Neville let out a long half-whistle, half-hiss and the snake stopped in its tracks. Neville hissed again, a soft, coaxing note in his back. He knelt on the floor, a gentle smile on his face and slowly, obediently the snake slithered back to him. He patted its head – or what Rose assumed was its head, because it would have been odd to pat the other end of its body – affectionately, allowed it to weave around on his forearm and then slipped it back into the enclosure. After shutting the cage, he finally said, “Smiley wouldn’t do anything to you,” he said, “Though you are right – I am special.”

*Smiley?* Smiley?! Rose thought, wondering if Neville was as stupid as he looked.

“S’okay, Ginny,” Neville said kindly to the little girl who was sucking her thumb again. “C’mon – you want to hold Smiley?” Ginny smiled and clambered off the bed. She toddled across the room, forgetting her fear of the snake within a few moments. Rose guessed that she



was very little – she couldn't have been much more than three-and-a-half. Three-and-a-half-year olds were always brats – they cried all the time for their Mums, sucked their thumb stupidly, didn't talk to you at all and stole all your toys.

While Neville and Ginny were busy with the menace named Smiley, Rose turned towards Ron. "Hey, there," she said brightly, trying to strike up a conversation because there really was nothing else to do. Neville didn't seem to have any toys. Odd boy that one. Or they might have been in his closet or under his bed or in another room or... But of course she wasn't going up to him to ask him for one – she'd eat boiling Stinksap before that. *Or maybe not.* "I'm lots nicer than Neville and I'm not stuck up at all. Do you hate strawberry ice cream?"

She'd learnt that the type of ice cream people hated spoke volumes about their character. Those who hated chocolate were idiots. Those who hated pistachio were picky eaters. Those who hated strawberry were her friends.

There was no response to her question. *Maybe he likes all kinds of ice cream.* "Ok, um..." She felt a little wrong-footed but plunged on bravely. "Don't you er, hate the color of your hair? I would if I were you, there's this girl at our school, Debbie Mancuso, and her hair's just as red as your sister's and all the boys call her Fire-Engine and I wouldn't like that at all. And she doesn't know how to sock anyone prop'rly too, she just cries about it to Kelly Prescott and Heather Martinson all the time. Rick Blair used to call me Crow-Face – just 'cause I have black hair – but then I punched him really hard one day and none of the guys ever call me names nowadays. Have you ever been called names like that?"

Ron said nothing, just continued to stare at the coverlet, not even betraying any sign that he'd ever heard her.

"Oh... well," Rose said, feeling even more awkward than before. "Um, so have you been to a Muggle school before? I know lots of wizard kids don't, but I do because my Mum is Muggle-born and she says it's a great idea to mix more with kids and school's pretty cool too, only I hate Rick Blair and Kel, Deb and Heather always laugh at me..."

but 'sides from that, it's lots of fun. Do you want to go to a Muggle school? I mean before we all have to go to Hogwarts? Do you?"

Still no answer.

"How old are you?" Rose was beginning to feel annoyed. Why wouldn't this boy answer her?

Should she tickle him? He might open up then. But tickling people was not nice and she had to be nice... ugh.

"Do you like your name? Sometimes I don't like my name because Rick always calls me Ring-around-the-Rosies and it's so girly-girly, just like Heather's name, but every girl in our family has a flowery name like my brand new cousin, Camellia Dursley. Do you have cousins?"

He stretched out his legs but gave no answer.

"I haven't met her yet. Or Aunt Petunia either – though I've seen photos, of course, only Muggle ones 'cause she's Muggle. I have another cousin too, Dudley Dursley. I saw a picture of him when I was smaller and he looked like a beach ball in a blue hat in it. He's pretty fat."

No indication of life.

"I'm glad I'm not fat. I couldn't have run around a lot if I was – but then Heather's not fat either and she doesn't do much running. Would you like to be fat or thin?"

Silence.

She tried to get him to talk but all she got for her pains were blank looks and Neville finally yelling at her to stop being a prat. Nearly an hour later, in sheer desperation (but she wasn't desperate enough to go up and play with Neville and Ginny, who were playing Train) she asked the stupidest question she could think of. "Did getting that tattoo hurt?" She pointed to his forehead.

“S’not a tattoo,” Ron said softly, looking at her through dreamy blue eyes. His voice was very soft and bizarrely enough it reminded her of Uncle Moony’s voice. “It hurt lots. Sectumsempra,” he said slowly. “That’s what she said. I think.”

“Who?” she asked curiously.

“Her,” he said and there was terror now in his blue eyes. He clammed up for the rest of the day and, eventually, she had to resort to playing with Neville and Ginny. They had a pillow-fight, played with Smiley – Rose began to like him – and Ginny’s brand-new, canary-yellow puffskein, and bounced on the bed. After an hour or so, Rose decided that Neville wasn’t a bad sort – he knew lots of new games and he didn’t yell at her so much now that she was playing. Also, he stopped saying that he was special. He was very sporting too and generously offered Rose ten Chocolate Frog Cards – “I have lots of them – I got them all from Dad’s old collection, you can have them”.

After that, Rose was forced to admit that he was a very nice guy. No boy who offered her so many Chocolate Frog Cards – Agrippa finally! – could be really bad at heart. They had lunch in the room – though Ron only picked at his food and didn’t eat much. Rose was able to confirm that Neville hated strawberry ice cream, thought the Falmouth Falcons were the coolest, most awesome team in the whole wide world, loved fresh carrots dipped in hot chocolate sauce and that his birthday was only one day before hers. That sealed her opinion of him – Neville Longbottom, no matter how arrogant he’d been before, was worthy to be her friend. There was even the possibility that in the course of time she might actually like him too.

Finally, Mummy came up. Rose was actually sorry to say good-bye – she liked Ginny too because Ginny was only three and looked up to her. “Bye,” she said unwillingly, waving to them. Ron was standing at the window quietly – he hadn’t said a word other than the few sentences when she’d talked to him – watching the sunset. He turned around however, when he heard Rose saying goodbye.

“Come again,” Neville said eagerly, casting her mother a winning smile. “Mrs. Potter can’t she *please* come again, soon – we had lots of fun today!” Rose almost envied his smile – she could tell he’d

completely won over her mother, something which she was never able to manage.

Mummy smiled and was about to say something before Ron sidled over to them, clutching a Chocolate Frog card. He handed it to Rose, and then hurried away, ears red. Mummy frowned slightly, and sighed, looking after him. "Yes, I'm sure she'll come again soon, dear," she said to Neville vaguely, resting her hand on Rose's shoulder. "I'm glad you had fun today."

"Is he funny in the head?" Rose asked Mummy after they'd arrived home – Side-Along Apparition.

Mummy frowned at her. "If he is, he has every right to be," she said quietly. "The things the poor boy has seen..." She shuddered and then asked, "What card is that by the way, sweetheart?"

Rose looked at the picture curiously – she hadn't glanced at it yet. It was one of a beautiful witch with cold, pale blue eyes that reminded her uncannily of Uncle Padfoot's and long, black hair. She flipped it over and read aloud, "Bellatrix Black Lestrage."

Mummy's face turned grey and she snatched the card, muttering, "How they can let murderesses on these cards...why, children might be reading them..."

"But I'm a child and I'm reading it!" Rose protested. "Maybe it's meant for children?"

Mummy turned hard eyes on her. "No," she said tonelessly, "No, I'm fairly sure they're not for children." And then she frog-marched Rose back into the house.

## ***Stranger in the Night***

*I mean, you're dealing with war, here. War CHANGES people, and people don't just forget about it when it's done. It sticks with you.*

### **Fuzzy Peach, Fictionalley**

*The sound of laughter, bright lights, and that nice, warm smell he'd come to identify with freshly-baked biscuits and little yellow flowers. He was happy, very happy, warm and secure, snug as the kittens frolicking on the floor. Then screams and he began to cry and a streak of blinding light, green, green, green, a high-pitched yell, and then he was sinking from an emerald sky into empty black, falling, falling, falling...*

Neville Longbottom toppled neatly out of bed, onto the beige-and-scarlet carpet. Rose Potter – lying askew on the pale blue sheets dotted with little yellow flowers – fell too, with a scream muffled by the hardwood floor. He huddled in the sheets, sweating and moaning. It was only when Rose had gotten her bearings back and had begun to scream at him in earnest that he finally woke up, out of the nightmare.

“What in Circe’s name were you *doing*?” she screeched, stumbling to her feet. She glared down at him in six-year-old fury. “You *imbecile*! I might have died!”

Neville wondered if that would have been such a bad thing after all. “Sorry,” he mumbled, “Just an old nightmare.”

She sniffed down at him disdainfully. “*The boy-who-lived* indeed,” she said, making big quote marks in the air. “More like the boy who gets nightmares when he’s away from Grandmummy!”

“I don’t!” he said hotly, stumbling onto her bed. He liked Rose fairly well enough but this was the last time, he assured himself, that he’d sleep over at her house. “It was about *that* night,” he snapped. “If you’d been through what *I*’ve been then...”

Rose put a hand to her forehead where a bruise was blossoming. “You were only a year old,” she said acidly. “Even *I* don’t remember anything that happened when I was that small. And I,” she finished

haughtily, flouncing out of the bedroom, “have far more brains than you could ever hope for, Neville Harfang Longbottom.”

*Coward, crybaby, whining brat, fool*, the insults she’d hurl at Neville the next morning – or tonight, actually – increased in direct proportion to the pain in her forehead. She wouldn’t wake Mummy – Mummy had a busy night-life tending little Harry – and Daddy was at work, probably sleeping over at the office, seeing that he was working on a deadline and could not afford to lose any extra minutes. *They overwork him*, she thought, feeling very mature as she made her way to the kitchen for ice, *I will never be an Auror. No matter how much money they get.*

She had just plastered the ice-cube wrapped in cloth to her forehead when low voices from the dining room attracted her attention. *2 a.m.* the little clock read. *Burglars*, she thought, a shot of fear passing through her as she crept noiselessly to the door, to look more closely at the mysterious occupants of the dining-room. She’d bolt if she saw anything suspicious and wake up Mummy. Yes, that’s what she’d do. Mummy was more than capable of taking care of evil burglars – she was brave and strong and powerful. *Nothing to be scared of.*

The dining room was darksave for a halo of cold, silver light issuing from a wand tip. It lit up the thin, worn face of a black-haired, dark-eyed man and the pale, delicate profile of a woman with dark red hair. *Mummy?* Rose thought in bewilderment, straining to hear the two. *What’s she doing there? That’s not Daddy...*

“Severus,” Mummy murmured, her voice low and hard. “What have you been doing with yourself these past five years, old friend?”

“Lily,” the man’s voice came out sharp and ragged. “Just listen to me, I have evidence...”

“The circumstances were certainly very strange,” Mummy’s voice was the same, low and yet so hard that it frightened Rose and apparently Severus What’s-his-Face. “Lord Voldemort –,” the man cringed, “dead one night and on the next, no trace of Severus Snape to be found. Not –,” her voice was poisonously sweet, understanding even. “Not that I blame you in the least. Azkaban has its terrors I’m sure, for a former Death Eater.”

Silence for a few moments. Then the man tilted his face slightly, more towards the light throwing a hooked nose and sharp features into greater prominence. "Yes, I was one," he said coldly. "I admit it now. I...regret it." A pause. "I have given myself unto Dumbledore – my remorse is sincere. But that is not what I came here for –"

"That is a very beautiful and well-prepared speech I'm sure," Lily said admiringly. "But I'm afraid that it does nothing to convince me. James will be here soon – you'd better be off." She began to lower her wand – Rose noticed just then that it had been at the man's throat. "Goodnight Severus."

Severus caught her wrist, eyes glinting dangerously. "I am not afraid of him," he said roughly. "If you think that I, that / would be frightened of..." He began to splutter incoherently, voice rising, murder written on his pale face.

"Hush, the children," Lily said automatically, in the same tone that she used whenever James was speaking too loudly and Harry was just falling asleep. Rose was now leaning against the doorway; the wet cloth held loosely in her hand, breath coming in and out in short, sharp gasps. She was bewildered, frightened, puzzled – and very, very interested. For a moment, there was tense silence, so thick that Rose felt that she could almost cut it with a knife, as the mysterious Severus began taking deeper, slower breaths, while Lily pulled down her wand. The silence was so intense it seemed to have its own ghosts – specters that looked on and held the breaths they could not take, waiting. *Waiting for what?*

"Rose? Rose – where are you?" Neville stumbled into the kitchen, bare feet slapping against the tiles loudly. Lily and Severus both heard – they would have been deaf if they hadn't, Neville's squeaky voice such a contrast to the heavy stillness that had reigned before – and Rose saw their faces stiffen for a split second before they both cried, "*Lumos!*" Light flooded into the dining room and kitchen and Rose saw a tall, thin man with shoulder-length, oily, black hair and shabby robes and her mother in a loose, red nightshirt standing together.

Lily's whole body sagged visibly when she saw Rose and Neville, and Severus' face was hard. "How long have you been here?" she croaked tiredly. Neville stared at Rose who threw him a blank, helpless look, glanced at Severus – who had raised his wand threateningly –, then at worn-out Lily, and then quickly again at Rose. In that instant, they read each other's minds and, simultaneously, launched into a deafening volley of explanations calculated to leave neither of the adults any wiser.

"I had a nightmare and..."

"I fell out of bed and..."

"She came down to get some ice..."

"And then I saw both of you and..."

"Perhaps you have not heard about what happens to eavesdroppers, young lady?" the other man growled. His expression was so fierce that Rose stepped back a little, daunted. Neville grabbed her arm and squeezed it reassuringly, his warm fingers bringing her comfort.

"You were hexing my mother!" Rose said defiantly, feeling stronger, now that she had Neville on her side.

"What else could she have done?" Neville demanded, scowling at Severus. "What'd you have done, huh?"

"I most certainly would not have..."

"Severus, *please*." There was a weary note of entreaty in Lily's soft voice as she held out a hand to silence them. Severus opened his mouth to retort, but abruptly closed it when she frowned and shook her head, ever so slightly. His jaw clenched hard, and slowly, he lowered his wand. "Children," she said, quietly, "This is my friend, Severus Snape. Severus – that's my daughter, Rose, and Neville Longbottom."

Severus looked at both of them, his eyes lingering a moment on Neville's scar and more than a moment on Rose's eyes. "I'd prefer," she continued as gently as if nothing was the matter, as if the world



was all fine and dandy and it wasn't two in the morning, and they weren't alone with a man who looked more than capable of murder, "that you didn't mention this to James. He... he might not take it well. There, now, go upstairs – you'll be exhausted in the morning, both of you. No, Rose, I'll be perfectly fine, hush. Severus..." she was almost pleading now. "Go."

"Lily?" There was a question in his voice – a question that Rose and Neville did not understand, but which Lily seemed to, perfectly.

"Yes." Her voice was still as tired as ever, but the tone was one of grudging agreement. Very grudging. "Yes. Now go."

He stared at her for a moment and then turned abruptly on his heel and swept out, as Rose and Neville stumbled upstairs. There was no need for conversation. That would take place later.

**000**

Rose woke up early the next morning. For a few moments she lay back on the bed, listening to Neville's rhythmic little snore-snorts and the birds – she'd never found out what birds they were – chirping outside. Then she heard what sounded like a dull roar, low but persistent, coming from downstairs. Wondering whether Severus Snape had come back again and Mummy was having a go at him again; she climbed down quietly, edging close to the wall.

She peeked into the drawing room and saw Daddy and Mummy, on opposite sides of the long room, screaming at each other, – just like she and Neville did – in the middle of a big fight. Daddy was clutching a newspaper so tightly that his knuckles were white and waving his hands dramatically, leaning slightly forwards, his feet close together. Mummy's face – especially her nose – was nearly as red as her hair, arms akimbo, legs planted wide apart. She was crying too, tears splashing down her freckled cheeks, and screaming even louder than Daddy.

"You'd believe that lying, filthy bat over *me*!" Daddy shouted. "Is there any *proof* that Peter was the mole?"

"Is there any proof he wasn't?" Mummy yelled, her voice thicker than usual. "Personally, I always suspected him!"

Daddy's face turned redder than ever. "He's my friend! I never even *thought* of suspecting him!"

"Because he was your friend!" Mummy blew her nose loudly, like a trumpeting elephant. "You don't believe Severus because you've always hated him! Always! Always!" She screamed like Harry during a tantrum, her voice reverberating through the room. She was so loud – she looked so completely out of control – that Rose jumped, and even James was startled into silence.

"You've always had it in for him!" Mummy screamed as loud as ever, even though Daddy was quiet now. "Ever since we were children – you and your little *gang*!" She spat the word out disgustedly, and then wiped spittle from the corners of her mouth. "You know you have – the look on your face says everything! Partisan politics, elitism... but Sweet Morgana, you've taken this schoolboy grudge too far, James Charlus Potter, you have now!"

"Lily," Daddy said gently, holding out his hands. "I was wrong about that. I don't hold a grudge against him, now..."

"Why should you hold a grudge against him, at all? Why should the question arise?" Mummy demanded, eyes flashing. Rose thought she was being very unreasonable – hadn't she been the one to bring up the question? Clearly, this Snape person was very important for Mummy and Daddy to fight over him like this. "If anyone should hold a grudge it's *him* but he hasn't, has he?"

"*He* was a Death Eater," Daddy said sadly, sinking into a sofa. "Was Peter? Lily, just *think*."

"Have you ever checked?" Mummy hollered. "Why don't you just push back the sleeve of his left forearm and cast a Deciphering Charm, or a *Revelio* perhaps, hmm? Ever thought of that? Oh wait, you wouldn't have – you hold your 'friends' in the highest regard, don't you? You'd die for them and everything, but you never bother to think that the boys you held grudges against as a child, *might just be right*! Maybe you aren't capable of conscious thought then – it just involves too

much effort! Better just go along with the flow, wing your way around, hmm? Die before distrusting your friends and everything – funny how those old quotes have a way of coming around full circle?”

Rose decided that Mummy had gone insane. But she was too scared to walk into the drawing room and rescue Daddy, whose face was now very pale.

Mummy smiled at how pale Daddy’s face was, and went on, not screaming now. Her voice sounded cracked from yelling so long though, but it was at its normal decibel level. “You and Sirius are just going to run off to wherever he is right now, but *you won’t find him*. He escaped, Severus told me, after Dumbledore questioned him. Filthy little rat.”

Daddy’s face was bone white now, and his knuckles stood out very prominently on his hands. The absence of the fifth knuckle on his right hand was very noticeable now – he’d lost his right thumb during the war.

Mummy was smiling as if she was mad. Not mad as in angry – mad as in crazy. “Dumbledore didn’t know. Severus didn’t know. You boys *were* clever at school – I’ll admit that. Don’t get up, James, – it’s no use. It’s too late now, you’ll never find him, and you’ll go on thinking what you think about Severus because you’re all of you biased *cowards!*” She flung the word at Daddy who stood up, jaw set, and then she, bursting into tears, fled into the kitchen, not even noticing Rose.

Daddy stood up, but didn’t attempt to follow her. Silently, he walked to the window and stared outside. Rose wanted to go in, to comfort him, to say something nice – but some instinct told her not to. *He needs to be alone.*

Shivering, she slipped upstairs and into her bedroom. Neville was still asleep, as if nothing had happened – still snoring softly. His face was serene, untroubled, a faint smile on his lips. Rose tiptoed across the room and slid into the covers, curling up close to him. His body was warm and she wrapped her arms around his neck, seeking comfort. *Everything’s going to be alright, everything has to be alright.* She could believe that – with Neville by her side.

Mummy was very teary the whole week and Daddy and Uncle Padfoot were very serious. Uncle Moony came home for a while – with gifts from Argentina – and everyone went about, pale and snappish the whole month. Then everything was suddenly settled, the adults were politer to each other – though they didn't speak very much about anything much, and hardly ever laughed. Uncle Peter became a taboo subject, Rose learnt. She wondered where he was, what he was doing, how he was – but she received no answers to her many, insistent questions. Finally, she decided that he was dead, and that the grown-ups were trying to spare her feelings by not telling her. And in September, she read a little article in the Daily Prophet – Aunt Mary made her read the paper everyday to improve her reading skills – about Severus Snape being appointed Potions Teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

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Two years ago, Bellatrix Lestrange had stared, disbelieving, at the article in *The Daily Prophet* around which Rodolphus had marked a circle in scarlet ink.

*Igor Karkaroff has been appointed Headmaster of Durmstrang Institute.*

Karkaroff... Headmaster?

Her mind had wandered back and she remembered the obnoxious, self-satisfied brat who'd proudly proclaimed to her on the train to Hogwarts, when they were both eleven, that he was the direct descendent of Salazar Slytherin. Lucius, being the inveterate name-dropper he'd been even at eleven, had included him in their gang. She'd protested, of course, but Lucius had overridden her with his promises to drop the boy after he'd finished checking his credentials. And like all of Lucius' promises, they'd been empty, had remained unfulfilled for years.

It had had been Lucius who'd brought forward Karkaroff to the Dark Lord ten years after their first meeting with the highest commendations – "He has a cunning, deft mind and thirsts for power and he has proved on countless occasions to be worthy to enjoy it,

My Lord". Well, he'd certainly been cunning enough, almost *too* cunning she'd sometimes thought...

*As our readers will remember, it was on his information that four Death Eater suspects – now officially confirmed – were arrested several years earlier.*

Well, she'd thought right hadn't she? Traitor. Spy. Betrayer. While turncoats were let loose over the land, nay put into positions of such great power and influence, *she*, the faithful one, the loyal one, sat encaged, helpless, in a lightless prison beneath a mountain of ancient stone. Angrily, she thrust the newspaper away from her and dug her nails frustrated, into her palms. Was there nothing she could *do*? Would she be kept, shackled and shut from the rest of the world, for years and years until she died at last? The thought was frightening enough to make her shiver and lean back against the stone wall, for strength to support herself.

She didn't mind dying. Death could not be as ghastly as some of the lives she'd witnessed. Life itself was not so beautiful that she could not bear the thought of leaving it. What frightened her was the thought that after her, there would be none strong or wise or fearless enough to seek out her master and bring him back to his rightful position. The filthy scum that had the nerve to call themselves Death Eaters – vile spawn from dishonorable loins – would do nothing. Their children, uncultivated, untaught, would do nothing.

She was the only one left.

It was that thought that gave her the strength to look at Rodolphus when he came to her later and say, "Free me. I am ready to take your Vows."

Now she stared once again, disbelieving, furious, at the Daily Prophet that announced that Severus Snape – the informer who'd turned in Peter Pettigrew (though he'd escaped, and his whereabouts had remained secret for the past few months), Alfred Graeme and Winthrop Lampbrush – had been appointed Potions Master at Hogwarts. She stared blankly at the paper for a moment and then took out the little notebook she liked to keep near her – to record important events of her day. She turned to a blank page and in her

slanted, oddly spidery letters meticulously wrote down the name, *Severus Snape*.

Mole. Dumbledore's pet.

Oh yes, he'd have to pay someday for his damning offences. She'd make sure of that.

## ***New Acquaintances***

*"It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! Can't you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"*

### **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, British Edition, Page 16**

"Lord almighty, Rose, what have you done to your hair?"

Rose winced, fingering the ends of her brutally shortened black hair. Make that *very* short – her once shoulder-length hair was now reduced to a crop of bristles that was hardly adequate enough to cover her scalp. Maybe opting for a more 'boyish' look wasn't such a great idea after all. "It's not that bad is it?" she asked anxiously. *No, it's probably much worse.*

"It's dreadful," Ginny said brightly, patting her own, thick, waist-length red hair. "Everyone's going to laugh at you once you get to Hogwarts."

*Well, at least I'll be the centre of attention. No use crying over spilt milk.* Rose shrugged, pretending she didn't care *that* much, and turned to Neville and Ron. Neville – whose own hair was just a little longer than Rose's – sniggered in answer to her look. "It's nice," Ron said absently. Ron thought everything was nice because he was about the nicest person Rose had ever known.

"Got your things?" she asked, ignoring Neville's sniggers and Ginny's giggles.

"Yeah. We just have to ogle that new range of broomstick accessories *Cirrus* has brought out now. You know, to spruce up the Nimbus 2000 for everyone who can afford to buy it," Neville said. "Seen the new Nimbus yet?"

"Who hasn't?" Rose chuckled. "It's a beauty, alright, perfect aerodynamic..."

“Have you seen Hannah?” Ginny interrupted, before Rose could launch into a minutely-detailed analysis of the newest broomstick on the line. Rose pointed to where Hannah and her gang were cooing over six-year-old Harry, outside, under the shade of Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor – sometimes Rose wondered whether Harry was a boy at all, he spent most of his time with girls. Ginny immediately sped off towards them, an amused grin still on her face – she was still thinking about Rose’s new haircut.

“Wand?” Rose asked, pulling out her own proudly from her jeans pocket.

Neville looked sulky now. He pouted. “I’ve got to use my dad’s. Gran says it’s an honor, but I think I deserve my *own* wand.”

“Mmm, how else will you defeat the non-existent Dark Lord?” Rose wondered aloud. “Without a personalized wand? Look at mine.”

It was ten-and-a-half inches long – just a little longer than Mum’s – and made of elder with a core of dragon-heartstrings. She liked the choice of core; she’d always loved dragons, ever since Uncle Padfoot had told her stories about Hungarian Horntails who subsisted on a daily diet of putrefied human entrails and live vulture flesh. Uncle Padfoot hadn’t been too pleased about the wood though – “*Wand of elder, never prosper*”, he’d quoted softly when she’d told him about her wand.

“Mine is a lot longer,” Neville said, looking smug. “Thirteen inches. That means I’ll be about a foot taller than you when I grow up.”

“You’re a foot shorter than me, right now,” Rose retorted. It was true – he was nearly three inches shorter than her. “What about Ron?”

“Fourteen inches, ash, unicorn hair,” Neville recited. “He’ll be taller than us both.”

“Why do you care?” Rose demanded, a bit annoyed. Every once in a while, Neville passed through ‘obsession-phases’, like Mum said, and he’d talk about nothing except his pet obsession for the day, and then forget all about it. So far, they’d gone through the Chocolate-Card phase (he’d gotten a hundred cards in a week out of that), the



ignoring-Smiley phase (during which the snake had nearly starved), and the Greatness-is-my-Destiny phase – which waxed and waned like the moon and was just as constant. “C’mon, lets go check out those new Nimbus accessories.”

“I can’t wait,” Neville said, throwing one arm around Rose’s shoulders – who laughed – and the other around Ron’s – who rolled his eyes. Together they walked towards Quality Quidditch Supplies, a few shops down from Fortescue’s Ice-Cream Parlor.

“Don’t get lost now,” Mum called out from the parlor where she, Daddy, Neville’s Gran, Mrs. Prewett, Uncle Padfoot, and his latest girlfriend were eating on the little outdoor tables. There was a shy smile on Ron’s face as he looked back at Uncle Padfoot’s pretty girlfriend – Ron worshipped all of Uncle Padfoot’s girlfriends, but was too shy to talk to them. Personally, Rose considered his affections misplaced. *All* of Uncle Padfoot’s girlfriends, without exception, were as brainless as they were beautiful.

“Isn’t it *gorgeous*,” Neville sighed longingly as they looked at the Nimbus 2000 displayed in the window. His chocolate-brown eyes shone with what Rose could only describe as *lust*.

“Why don’t you get your Gran to buy it for you?” Rose suggested, tapping the glass display window. “You *are* the Boy-who-Lived.” She loved goading Neville.

“It’s way too expensive, you know that, Rose. And besides, she says I’m too young. It’s not fair – the rule against first-years being allowed brooms, I mean,” Neville scowled as they entered the shop.

“I agree,” a voice drawled. A small blond boy emerged from the interior of the shop. He eyed Neville and Rose carefully, a disdainful half-smile on his face. Rose knew, without being told, that he was a pureblood with a recorded bloodline that extended several centuries – *spoilt Pureblood brat*. Uncle Padfoot had told her plenty of stories about trashy, little ferrets of his ilk.

“Neville Longbottom,” Neville said proudly, puffing out his chest. He carefully brushed away his brown fringe from his forehead, so that

Malfoy could get a better look at his scar. Rose was tempted to roll her eyes – Neville simply couldn't resist introducing himself.

The boy's eyes widened and he looked impressed. "Draco Malfoy," he drawled, smiling (not half-smiling), and extending his hand. Neville grasped it. The Malfoy boy didn't even spare a second glance for redheaded, freckled Ron and surly, tight-lipped Rose but, with a friendly smile for Neville, he began, "So what do you think about the Harpies' winning streak? Think they'll be able to keep it up for long?"

Neville was a boy. He was also eleven, and therefore his favorite topic was Quidditch. No ifs, buts, and whys about it – eleven-year-old boys lived and breathed Quidditch. Period. End of story. "Oh, I don't know about that – Gwenog Jones has a tight grip on them now, but she's thinking of..."

"Tripe," Malfoy said, "tripe – I bet you read that she's thinking of retiring? Well, that was in the Q.U.A.B.B.L.E magazine, wasn't it? They aren't very accurate about national players and teams – I mean, they have an international fan base and..."

"Yeah, I know they've got to cater to them, but still..." Neville said enthusiastically, gesticulating with his hands. Rose and Ron had been quite effectively excluded from the conversation – by intention, Rose was pretty sure. The Malfoy kid was certainly very interested in Neville. *Elitist pig*. Neville was too busy chatting with his new acquaintance to notice that Rose and Ron were taking no part in the conversation – though both of them loved Quidditch as much as him, too. Sometimes boys were very dense.

*Better start browsing while I'm here*, Rose thought, deciding that it was best to leave Neville and Malfoy alone. Who knew how long they might talk about Quidditch?

Taking hold of Ron, she strode into the back of the shop where all the goodies were. It was fairly crowded today – no surprise, considering that it was mid-morning Sunday. Rose and Ron quickly lost themselves in the midst of the large, milling crowd at the back – most of them admiring the new Nimbus broomstick and the range of accessories that accompanied it. *Maybe I'll be able to afford it in twenty years*, she thought wistfully, being jostled by the throng, all of

whom were impatient to get a better look at the Nimbus. She'd ask for a broomstick for her next birthday – Circe's pigs, how long it seemed. Of course, she didn't dare dream of asking for a *Nimbus*. Well, maybe she would, but no way in the world would Mum buy her one – or let Uncle Padfoot buy her one either.

*I won't have you spoilt rotten like some of those children*, Mum would say, lip curling in scorn. Rose knew which children she meant – children like Draco Malfoy. No doubt he got anything he asked for – probably without even asking for it. Or, well, without begging on bended knee at least.

"Do you think the Harpies' winning streak will continue?" Ron asked absently, while they were inspecting the special gloves Beaters used in real matches.

"Probably not," Rose grinned. "I don't care what Ginny tells you – she's on their side, so how do you expect her to be an impartial judge? With all those sleazy women on the team..."

"Gwenog Jones, that old geezer, sleazy?" Ron chuckled.

"It's an all-women's team," Rose said patiently. "They all have to be sleazy – for publicity purposes. Honestly, I think it's pretty stupid to have an all-women's team – it's so..." She struggled for a word, frowning.

"Sexist? Chauvinistic in favor of females?" Ron suggested.

"Zactly," Rose said. "You won't catch *me* joining their team, ever. Now don't give me that look."

"I'm not," Ron said quickly, rearranging his features into a grin, instead of a grimace. "But don't you think you're a little, um... well, stuck up?"

"Of course not," Rose said calmly. "I am a genius – geniuses have the right to be as stuck up as they please."

"Send me an autograph when you win the World Cup," Ron said.

“Don’t worry – I will.”

They spent a few minutes wandering through the shop, examining things, whining about the prices, and talking about – what else? – Quidditch. “I think we should go back now,” Ron said, about fifteen minutes later, checking his watch. “Aunt Muriel won’t be too pleased if we keep her waiting much longer. Odd isn’t it, Nev not joining us, I mean?”

“He might have dragged that little pipsqueak along with him,” Rose said. “God, I hope he’s finished talking to that albino fan of his.”

Ron chuckled and swung an arm over Rose’s shoulders. “C’mon – I think I can hear his voice from that side.”

“You don’t think he’s actually *still* talking to that bloke, still?” Rose demanded, aghast.

“We’ll never know if we don’t find out,” Ron said pragmatically and drew Rose with him towards the direction from where Neville’s voice drifted.

“Aidan Lynch? Hmm, I’m not quite sure...” Neville was saying.

The Malfoy boy interrupted him pompously, “But my *father* says...”

Neville scowled and said, “Well, *I* say...”

Rose took one look at the situation, slipped out of Ron’s hold, and looped her arm through Neville’s. She would just have to drag him away. There were no other alternatives. “That we should get going now, so goodbye whatever-your-name-is,” Rose said promptly, with a tight smile at Malfoy.

“Who are you?” Malfoy demanded, pale eyes narrowing disapprovingly at her.

“Rose,” Neville answered for her, turning to look at her with surprise, as though he’d just noticed her. “Rose Potter.” Malfoy frowned slightly – Rose would bet her allowance he was trying to remember if he’d heard her surname before – and then half-shrugged as if to say /

*might have come upon your surname under a pureblood registration directory, sometime. Hmm, I suppose I might condescend to associate with you.*

“Well, as I was saying...” Malfoy began again, eyes riveted on Neville’s scar.

“I’m sure you two children have had a lovely little chat, but we really must be going now,” Rose sang, digging her nails into Neville’s arm. “So *goodbye*.” And with that, she truly dragged Neville and Ron firmly out of the shop – ignoring the former’s protests. Once outside, she finally muttered disapprovingly to Neville, “The riff-raff you go around with...”

“Oh, you’re not jealous of him, are you?” Neville grinned, attempting to pry her off him. “Gerroff, Rose...”

Rose dropped his arm like a hot potato. “Why should I be?” she demanded pettishly, throwing her arm over a bemused Ron’s shoulders.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe because I’m the most gorgeous, intelligent, famous guy in the world?”

“And also apparently homosexual,” Ron muttered under his breath. Rose stifled a giggle.

Neville didn’t hear them – or pretended he hadn’t. “Rest your fears, gentle damsel,” he said grandly. “For he of the Silvery Locks is a pompous git who cannot go two sentences without saying, *Well my father says...*” Neville made a face. “Snobby little brat, stuck-up see?”

“You’d be a fine judge of stuck-upness, wouldn’t you?” Rose asked, trying to muster sufficient stinging scorn.

They’d just reached the Ice-Cream Parlor and Uncle Padfoot was making out with his girlfriend – Ron began watching with interest. The sun was shining brightly and Harry’s dark red hair gleamed like polished mahogany. Mum and Daddy were holding hands and Mrs. Prewett was sniffing disdainfully at the sight. Ginny was laughing and pulling one of Hannah’s blond pigtails. Life was beautiful.

“Of course I’d be a fine judge,” Neville turned to her as if she were insane to doubt it. “*You* tell me often enough that I’m the most stuck-up person since Merlin, and I tend to believe what you say.”

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Daddy had been home very late (late even for an Auror, whose normal workday usually lasted about twelve hours) every night for nearly a month, ever since the attempted Gringotts Bank Robbery. However, on the 31st of August, he was back from work before Rose went to bed. To be fair, Mum had been trying to coerce her into going to bed for an hour, insisting that it was too late for her to stay up, she had a big journey tomorrow, needed the sleep, etc. Naturally, Rose had been valiantly resisting her attempts to be put to bed like a baby, and they’d reached a stalemate when Daddy arrived at ten o’clock. He’d even brought Uncle Padfoot home with him.

“How was your day, dear? Sirius?” Mum asked as the men tramped in. “No, Rose, I won’t hear another word out of you. So, off to bed you go now. You won’t get a wink of sleep tonight if you don’t. Right this minute, young lady.” Rose scowled down at her mother from the staircase where she’d perched for the last hour, waiting for Daddy to come home early because he’d *promised*.

“Rotten day,” Daddy announced, kissing Mum’s cheek. “Lo, Rosalie – did you stay up for Daddy?”

“Absolutely rotten,” Uncle Padfoot agreed gravely, grimacing and moving his hand around his nose, as though to clear his nostrils of the scent of fluffy-duffy, chocolate-and-honey love that Daddy and Mum practically *emitted*.

Rose grinned down at him, and for effect, pinched her nose as though she too were disgusted by this open show of warm, sweetly commonplace affection. Uncle Padfoot nodded his approval of her move as he said, “Rose, don’t go to bed yet. We have something for you.” She’d been expecting that but still she scrambled downstairs as excitedly as if it were a surprise, smug and pleased that she’d triumphed over Mum for once. The golden snitches on her baby blue pajamas sparkled and her bunny slippers, which changed color according to her mood, turned bright pink.

“*Really*,” Mum said disapprovingly and Uncle Padfoot grinned as they all entered the drawing room.

“We would be better off giving up the hunt,” he sighed, falling onto a sofa languorously. “Too much time, too much money wasted. Not to mention that all of us are being worked to the bone – of course, that argument doesn’t count for much, nowadays.”

He was talking about Incident-Partially-Disclosed-to-the-Media Number 227 of that year. Rose had pieced together why the aforementioned incident was an incident at all after a month’s – it had happened on her birthday – worth of eavesdropping on conversations and annoying Uncle Padfoot so that he told her. Someone had broken into a Gringotts’ Vault but hadn’t managed to get away with whatever was in there because it had already been removed earlier. Personally, Rose considered them mad – even *Uncle Padfoot* didn’t think that he could rob a Gringotts’ Vault and live to tell the tale.

“Lils, can you go away for a minute?” Uncle Padfoot asked. “We want to hold an initiation ceremony in your living room.”

“If it involves muck on my carpets, no,” Mum replied.

“It doesn’t,” Daddy smiled and shooed Mum away.

“Don’t tell your mother about this,” Uncle Padfoot warned her, after Daddy had shut the door, drawing something out from his jeans’ pocket. Rose scooted over closer to him, keen to see what he’d got for her. Was it a book on dangerous hexes? Was it a broomstick (she wondered how he’d fit a broomstick into his jeans)? Was it a...

“It’s an old piece of parchment!” she said, disappointed. It was a large square of yellowing parchment, a little tattered at the corners.

“An old piece of parchment?” Uncle Padfoot cried, looking horrified. “*Are you mad?*”

She thought that he was the mad one in the room, or perhaps Daddy – who was grinning like mad. “Hush, both of you,” Daddy said before Rose could open her mouth to argue. Tapping his wand on the paper, he said, “*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*”

And at once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web from the point where Daddy's wand had touched. They joined each other, they criss-crossed and fanned into every corner of the parchment, and then words began to blossom across the top – great, curly, green words that proclaimed:

***Messers Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs***

***Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers***

***are proud to present***

***THE MARAUDERS' MAP***

"Map of Hogwarts," Uncle Padfoot stated unnecessarily. It was indeed a map, but what made it truly remarkable were the tiny ink dots moving around it, each labeled with a name in miniscule writing.

"You made this?" Rose whispered, awed and astounded, peering closer at the map.

They nodded proudly, Uncle Padfoot smiling fondly as though the map were his newborn. "We used it all the time at school. Our aim was a truly noble one – to supply and to aid newer generations of law-breakers with the latest technology in law-breaking," he said, his eyes misty.

"Aye. Noble-minded, ingenious young men were we, truly indeed," Daddy sighed pensively, sounding like someone from the fifteenth century. "Those were the days...remember the time we got four detentions from four different teachers in one night?"

"And papered the school with those love-letters from Hagrid to McGonagall?" Uncle Padfoot warbled.

"And turned all the Ravenclaws' hair blue-and-bronze?" Daddy smiled reminiscently.

"And handed out *Voluptuous Veela Vixens* to the first years?" Uncle Padfoot giggled.



“And painted the Slytherin Common Room red-and-gold?” Daddy chuckled.

“And hired all those singing dwarfs for Valentines’ day?” Uncle Padfoot snickered.

“And blocked all the girls’ loos in the school for a day?” Daddy laughed.

“And –” Uncle Padfoot began, but Rose coughed and said “*Ahem*” just like Mum. She had a feeling that their Remember-the-Good-Old-Days discussion would last all night if she let it. Not that the pranks they must have played in their day weren’t brilliant... just that it wasn’t as much fun hearing about them as it was experiencing them. Or watching other people experience them.

“But it’s yours now, youngling,” Uncle Padfoot said, gathering himself with an obvious effort. “Yours, until it’s Harry’s turn to go to Hogwarts and then whoever comes after. When you’re done with it, just tap it once and say ‘Mischief Managed!’ and it’ll clear up by itself.”

Daddy nodded dreamily and then he and Uncle Padfoot hugged each other, launching into a full-blown nostalgia session complete with trumpeting handkerchiefs, an array of sobs, and song-and-dance routines for her benefit. Well, almost – they barely restrained themselves from the song-and-dance caper.

But of course, they both had, what Mum called ‘a flair for histrionics’ and both wanted to squeeze as much drama from the moment as they possibly could. Rose didn’t play along though – she didn’t have a flair for histrionics. *That* was Neville’s department, and she was content to leave the dramatizing to him – he liked it. Instead, after listening for a few minutes and wondering how any of their teachers were still alive, she tiptoed up to bed, her grin a mile wide, ignoring Mum’s questions.

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“Wasn’t that fun?” Rose asked enthusiastically, emerging, breathless on the other side of Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters. Her question

was directed towards Neville who looked at her in horrified bemusement, his face geranium-pink.

“Bet you were scared,” Rose grinned. “Bet you thought you weren’t magical enough to get onto the Platform.” Neville muttered something under his breath that was distinctly uncomplimentary towards the system of getting onto the platform and his frank opinion of Rose’s ideas of fun.

“You’re not being nice,” Ron said mildly, emerging far more gracefully than either Rose or Neville from the barrier. Behind him, Ginny and Uncle Padfoot squealed in delight. Rose heard someone sigh, “*You’re still such a child, Sirius,*” and was willing to bet that it was her mother.

“Come on,” she said, checking her watch. “Train leaves in fifteen minutes – we’d better get a move on it.” The boys nodded and together, they wasted no time heaving their large trunks and Neville’s handsome tawny barn owl – Butterscotch, he’d named it in a spasm of inspiration that matched his mood while christening Smiley – onto the train.

“Hey, look, there’s your yes-man,” Rose said, shoving Neville towards a lean blond boy who was tugging his trunk towards the train. Neville cast an interested look towards the boy who was attempting to lift his trunk onto the train. He squinted for a moment and then suddenly turned pale.

“What’s the matter?” Rose demanded as Hannah Abbott pounced on Ginny and Harry and bore them off in a wave of sickly sweet perfume. She peered more closely at the boy and then, with a spasm of shock, suddenly understood the matter. The boy had a short fringe of golden-blond – not white-blond like the Malfoy boy’s – hair that partially covered his pale, freckled forehead. Yet she could still see the shape of a black skull with a snake emerging from its mouth that appeared to be carved there. It was the same mark that was on Ron’s forehead.

“Circe’s pigs,” she whispered in awe. “Mum, look,” she said, tugging at Mum’s sleeve. “Look at that boy...”

The aforementioned boy gave a soft cry of pain as the trunk he'd been trying unsuccessfully to load onto the train landed on his foot. "Oh poor dear..." Mum's voice trailed off, her pretty face worried. She strode forwards, Rose and Neville trailing in her wake, and after a few, short, low words with the boy loaded his trunk – clumsily – onto the train. The boy murmured his thanks and then clambered onto the train, tugging his fringe lower to cover his forehead, without a second glance back.

Mum was still cooing 'poor dear' and Uncle Padfoot was still flirting so outrageously with a pair of seventh-year girls that even Daddy was rolling his eyes ten minutes later. There was a change though, now the train was tooting impatiently as if in a rush to be off, eleven o'clock had just clanged noisily and children were scrambling into the train, waving handkerchiefs and blowing kisses to their parents from compartment windows, all chattering and laughing and crying at once.

"Unleash as much as havoc as you can!" Uncle Padfoot roared, shoving Rose into the train.

Daddy smiled, "Owl us as soon as you can – it doesn't matter what house you're in –" he glared at Uncle Padfoot who was mouthing *If it's not Gryffindor, we'll disown you* "- Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff it's all the same to us!"

"*And Slytherin,*" Mum said, kissing Ron and Rose and Neville together one last time. The door slammed shut and the train began to move. Rose half-hung out of the window, waving as hard as she could to them.

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"Wake up," Neville hissed, poking her shoulder hard. "We're here." Rose managed a soft *oof* and tried to drag her head off Neville's comfortable shoulder. She always fell asleep on rides that lasted for more than fifteen minutes. It was embarrassing, but something she'd never been able to cure.

Neville abruptly stood up and Rose nearly lost her balance and fell flat on her face on the ground. Luckily, one of the Malfoy boy's thugs – Grab or Coyle, whatever his name was – grabbed her arm and

straightened her. “Fanks,” she muttered, rubbing her eyes blearily and trailing after Neville and the Malfoy boy, trying to cover up her yawns. It had been a distressingly *boring* ride – it hadn’t been tedious or dreary or any other synonym, just plain old boring.

The Malfoy boy had apparently been patrolling the corridors, searching for famous Neville Longbottom, and had managed to grab and haul aforementioned celebrity and company to his compartment. It didn’t take long for them to reach first-name status and Rose just wondered when they’d pop the question. Both were competitors for position of the Greatest Git in the World and both seemed to have an equal chance of winning the Crown of Gitness – people like Uncle Padfoot, the Minister for Magic and even herself stood no chance in the face of their combined gitness.

Grab and Coyle – Rose suspected that those were not their names and that she’d muddled up the introduction ceremony – seemed to exist solely for the Malfoy boy’s benefit. They were walking boulders who’d polished off half the lunch trolley, delighted in reading comics that six-year-old Harry considered childish and guffawed sycophantically at Malfoy’s – and now Neville’s – poor attempts at jokes. Ron had been studying them – discreetly – and Rose had no doubt that he intended to write a scholarly thesis detailing the behavior of apes-in-semihuman-form with Grab and Coyle as examples.

Rose, after losing a few games at chess with Ron, imitating Grab and Coyle, changing into her robes and trying different types of yawns had simply fallen asleep. What else could she do? She shivered as she reached the platform because it was cold and raining. She hated the weather at Hogwarts already.

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“Are you alright?” a voice squeaked and the person with bushy hair began slapping her cheeks as if that might. *Oh, I’m doing fine, darling no need to worry. After all, it’s not really unusual is it for a person to three-quarters-drown, half-die and then be hurled into a boat by a Giant Squid, is it? No need to worry about me.* Rose realized that she was alright and immediately felt annoyed.

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“We’d better get you up t’ the school fast,” Hagrid whispered. He’d just reached them and his face was very grey. He carried her as easily as if she were a child – which she was not – into his boat and threw his large coat over her. It covered her entirely, from the tips of her messy black hair that was sticking up even more than usual, either from the cold or in terror she couldn’t tell, to the ends of her very, very soggy socks. She curled up in the coat, heart still pounding in her throat, and this time she forgot to fall asleep.

## ***Welcome to Hogwarts***

*A mistake commonly made: Dark is not necessarily evil. The majority of Slytherins are dark, but whether you are evil or not is your choice and nobody else's.*

### **Slytherin Code of Conduct**

“Wasn’t that fun?” Rose asked enthusiastically, emerging, breathless on the other side of Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters. Her question was directed towards Neville, who looked at her in horrified bemusement, his face geranium-pink.

“Bet you were scared,” Rose grinned. “Bet you thought you weren’t magical enough to get onto the Platform.” Neville muttered something under his breath that was distinctly uncomplimentary towards the system of getting onto the platform and his frank opinion of Rose’s ideas of fun.

“You’re not being nice,” Ron said mildly, emerging far more gracefully than either Rose or Neville from the barrier. Behind him, Ginny and Uncle Padfoot squealed in delight. Rose heard someone sigh, “*You’re still such a child, Sirius,*” and was willing to bet that it was her mother.

“Come on,” she said, checking her watch. “Train leaves in fifteen minutes – we’d better get a move on.” The boys nodded and, together, they wasted no time heaving their large trunks and Neville’s handsome, tawny barn owl – Butterscotch, he’d named it in a spasm of inspiration that matched his mood while christening Smiley – onto the train.

“Hey, look, there’s your yes-man,” Rose said, shoving Neville towards a lean blond boy who was tugging his trunk towards the train. Neville cast an interested look towards the boy who was attempting to lift his trunk onto the train. He squinted for a moment and then, suddenly turned pale.

“What’s the matter?” Rose demanded as Hannah Abbott pounced on Ginny and Harry and bore them off in a wave of sickly sweet perfume. She peered more closely at the boy and then, with a spasm of shock,

suddenly understood the matter. The boy had a short fringe of golden-blond – not white-blond like the Malfoy boy's – hair that partially covered his pale, freckled forehead. Yet, she could still see the shape of a black skull with a snake emerging from its mouth that appeared to be carved there. It was the same mark that was on Ron's forehead.

"Circe's pigs," she whispered in awe. "Mum, look," she said, tugging at her Mum's sleeve. "Look at that boy..."

The aforementioned boy gave a soft cry of pain as the trunk he'd been trying unsuccessfully to load onto the train landed on his foot. "Oh poor dear..." Mum's voice trailed off, her pretty face worried. She strode forwards, Rose and Neville trailing in her wake, and – after a few, short, low words with the boy – loaded his trunk – clumsily – onto the train. The boy murmured his thanks and then clambered onto the train, tugging his fringe lower to cover his forehead, without a second glance back.

Mum was still cooing 'poor dear' and Uncle Padfoot was still flirting so outrageously with a pair of seventh-year girls that even Daddy was rolling his eyes ten minutes later. There was a change though, now the train was tooting impatiently as if in a rush to be off, eleven o'clock had just clanged noisily, and children were scrambling into the train, waving handkerchiefs and blowing kisses to their parents from compartment windows, all chattering and laughing and crying at once.

"Unleash as much as havoc as you can!" Uncle Padfoot roared, shoving Rose into the train.

Daddy smiled, "Owl us as soon as you can – it doesn't matter what house you're in –" he glared at Uncle Padfoot who was mouthing, *If it's not Gryffindor, we'll disown you* "- Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff it's all the same to us!"

"*And Slytherin,*" Mum said, kissing Ron and Rose and Neville together one last time. The door slammed shut and the train began to move. Rose half-hung out of the window, waving as hard as she could to them.



“Wake up,” Neville hissed, poking her shoulder hard. “We’re here.” Rose managed a soft *oof* and tried to drag her head off Neville’s comfortable shoulder. She always fell asleep on rides that lasted for more than fifteen minutes. It was embarrassing, but something she’d never been able to cure.

Neville abruptly stood up and Rose nearly lost her balance and fell flat on her face. Luckily, one of the Malfoy boy’s thugs – Grab or Coyle, whatever his name was – grabbed her arm and straightened her. “Fanks,” she muttered, rubbing her eyes blearily and trailing after Neville and the Malfoy boy, trying to cover up her yawns. It had been a distressingly *boring* ride – it hadn’t been tedious or dreary or any other synonym, just plain old boring.

The Malfoy boy had apparently been patrolling the corridors, searching for famous Neville Longbottom, and had managed to grab and haul aforementioned celebrity and company to his compartment. It didn’t take long for them to reach first-name status and Rose just wondered when they’d pop the question. Both were competitors for position of the Greatest Git in the World and both seemed to have an equal chance of winning the Crown of Gitness – people like Uncle Padfoot, the Minister for Magic, and even herself, stood no chance in the face of their combined gitness.

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**000**

*Dear Daddy and Mum,*

*Drop anything and everything you're holding, and then proceed to the letter.*

*I'm in Slytherin.*

*Don't look at the letter like that – you'll hurt the parchment's feelings. You might want to have a few jugs of Firewhiskey and perhaps a few joints of Salazar's Whiskers on the hand if Uncle Padfoot's coming today. I'm sure I'm going to get plenty of hate-mail from him.*

*Don't cry, it's not as bad as it seems. Neville's with me – you might want to ply Mrs. Longbottom with some Firewhiskey before you tell her though. Neville's too scared to mail her himself – his official excuse is that his undying love of me won't permit him to mail his Gran before I mail my parents. No wonder he's not in Gryffindor, little coward.*

*I'm disappointed too, the Hat was really weird and kept going on and on about the history of Hogwarts and stuff – very chatty Hat – and I got bored and thought, 'Shut up', and it just screamed out Slytherin. I think I offended it. By the way, I nearly died yesterday – it's all in the official report Professor McGonagall is gong to send you.*

*Don't worry – it was pretty cool, though I don't think death from drowning is really fun. Cold-cool yeah, but not fun. Ron's in Ravenclaw – he was reading the History of Magic textbook after we bought it, do you honestly think he'd fit into any other House? Plus, he beat Uncle Padfoot at chess ten times in a row that day you two went away.*

The blond kid with the skull on his forehead got into Gryffindor – I think he was a Smith or something. There was another girl with a skull on her head too, Susan Bones, she got into Hufflepuff. So did Hannah and her cronies. I miss you already – not Harry though, he's a prat and he's not going to get my room even if I die, okay?

*Lots of Love,*

*Rose*

"I'm sure it was for the best," James said diplomatically, carefully folding the letter. "Our baby in Slytherin! I'm sure she'll have lots of fun! No, Padfoot, you cannot use my best razorblade to slit your wrists."

"Where did we go wrong?" Sirius wailed, clutching his head. "I thought she was a good girl, a smart girl. I don't know where I went wrong..."

"Stop being ridiculous, Sirius," Lily said curtly. "It doesn't matter if she's in Slytherin or Hufflepuff or wherever. It wouldn't matter if she were a Squib."

"Would," Sirius said sullenly, shaking his head. "My goddaughter...in Slytherin..." He shook his head gloomily. "Bet you'll be in Hufflepuff," he told Harry balefully.

Harry looked up from his breakfast. "Hannah's in Hufflepuff," he said dreamily, "That wouldn't be so bad..."

"Of course, it wouldn't!" Lily said brightly.

James's dazzling, fake smile lost a few watts at this piece of information.

*Dear Rose,*

*Of course it doesn't matter to us if you're in Slytherin! Why should it? After all, there's only a slight chance involved that you might turn into a mass murderess like my lovely, lovely cousin Bellatrix or a power-crazed maniac like her tutor in the truly eeeeeeeevil Dark Arts*

*(which no doubt, you're probably already learning, being in Slytherin), LV, but aside from that...*

"Cut," Lily snapped, peering over Sirius's letter. "If you're going to take that tone with her then you might as well not write to her at all."

*Dear Rose,*

*We're all heartbroken though we're doing our best to hide that with our typical stiff-upper-lip gestures and smile-till-you-die gestures...*

"No, I don't think that would work either," James patted Sirius.

*Rose Iris Potter,*

*Now I know why your mother gave you that middle name (ever thought that your initials are R.I.P?). It's because she's past mistress at the art of irony and you are most definitely NOT going to rest in peace once you get back here...*

Lily groaned and buried her head in her arms.

*Rose,*

**REASONS I HATE YOU:-**

*You're in Slytherin*

*You make me sound like a two-year-old/a jilted lover (very, very disturbing...)*

"See if I let you godfather-ize anymore of my children," James huffed.

"It's not like you're going to churn out any more kids," Sirius sniffed. He drew a large smiley-face on a parchment and scribbled *Dear Rose, we're behind you every step of the way into your glorious doom!*

"You never know," James said, a smile flitting on his face. "We might be expecting the pitter-patter of little feet just now."

"I am *not* little!" Harry yelled from upstairs. "I am *six*!"

“He sounds more like me everyday,” Sirius said with obvious pride. He scribbled out the glorious doom part of the sentence and then showed the letter to James. “Will this do?”

“I don’t know,” James said, twisting the picture. “Your smiley looks kinda like it’s got constipation...”

“So she’ll know I wish that upon all her little Slytherin friends,” Sirius said darkly. He folded the letter and immediately hustled about in the business of owling it to Rose. “What’s up with the pitter-patter-feet business anyway?”

“Oh, nothing,” James half-smiled, turning away. Sirius lunged for him and then – after a look at his bright, happy face – burst into congratulations.

**000**

The Slytherin dormitories were in the dungeons. The dungeons were located under the lake. Rose had *known* that – Uncle Padfoot had told her all about the living arrangements for the different Houses when she was nine – but knowing wasn’t the same as experiencing. Under the lake. No chance of ever espying daylight from here. Or sunlight. Or moonlight. Or any other kind of natural light.

The dormitory was an almost circular chamber with smooth stonewalls and a high ceiling that tapered sharply at the top and made the large room seem even larger. A cold, artificial green light bathed the five beds arranged in a semi-circle and made the chilly room seem even frostier. Feeling forlorn and alone, Rose glanced at the antique silver clock perched on the bedside table nearest to her. It was just five o’clock.

It was an ungodly hour to wake up, she decided, splayed across the green-and-silver sheets. Made even more ungodly by the fact that she was the only one awake in this huge, chilly room, so sumptuously upholstered in green and silver.

Homesick – that’s how she felt. She yearned for home and her little bed with the pale-blue blankets speckled with daisies. For the walls swathed in photographs of dragons and Nundus and Aidan Lynch.

For the little Kneazle-shaped clock, an antique in its own right because it had been her Grandmother Dorea's, perched on the bedside table. For the safe, embedded behind the false wall of the closet – large enough for Harry to fit in comfortably – chock full of Quidditch memorabilia, stored money, packets of Every-Flavor Beans...

There was nothing and nobody in this cold, alien room to remind her of home, to make her feel better and less alone. Gryffindor where she was sure she belonged, Hufflepuff filled with plodders yes, but friendly plodders all of them, Ravenclaw even – they would all have been so much better. Anything but Slytherin. *I'm a half-blood. I'm not that ambitious, or even cunning. Maybe resourceful, but hey, everyone in the world is resourceful when they have to be. Determined, yeah – but so are Daddy and Mum and Uncle Padfoot... and I'm so good too. Well, maybe, I could be nicer to people, but yeah – I'm good. Why am I here?*

She'd write to her parents today – she shuddered and wondered how they'd react to her being in Slytherin – that might make her feel better, but she was just so *homesick*. She made a note never to mention that fact to Neville. Or Uncle Padfoot. They'd take it as a sign of weakness, and she didn't want anyone to think her weak. Anything but weak. She'd soldier it out, here, in this House, where she was sure she did not belong, courageously like the Gryffindor she was sure she was. With dignity and pride. She would never shrivel up before anyone. Never ever.

The four other girls in the dormitory were still asleep. The one who occupied the bed at the edge of the semi-circle (farthest from Rose) was a small girl with pixie-cut, short, black hair that framed her oddly pug-like face – not that Rose had anything against pugs. She had the freckliest and snubbest of snub, freckly noses. Pansy Parkinson.

The girl with the bed next to Pansy – Tracey Davies – had long, straight, silky, strawberry-blond hair. Rose envied her hair. She was sleeping with her head at an angle to the floor and her beautiful, Rapunzelesque hair had fallen to the ground, the burnished, golden tips just touching the velvet carpet.



Then there was a wide-set, hard-faced girl who would look absolutely fetching with Crabbe and Goyle – their real names were far more atrocious than the names ‘Grab’ and ‘Coyle’ that Rose had invented for them. She too had short, dark hair but Rose remembered that her sleepy, chocolate brown eyes glimmered with friendliness last night. A possible ally, she looked far more approachable than the beauty of the dormitory or the unpleasant-looking pug – even if she had a slight weight problem.

The girl with the bed next to Rose’s – Rose slept nearest to the door – was the tallest among them all, with chubby cheeks and residual puppy fat, waist-length, very blond hair, and leaf-green eyes, beautiful even behind the heavy, wire-rimmed spectacles that sat perched on her long nose. Daphne Greengrass.

*If they don’t like me, I don’t like them, Rose thought grimly. I’ll swipe Davies’ shampoo or whatever book she keeps her hair charm secrets in, if she racquets about with me. Those bombshells usually start vendettas first. If that fatso rushes to her defense, I’ll plant forged love-letters from Crabbe or Goyle in her bureau. Probably give her enough shower-nozzle masturbation material for a year. If that Parkinson kicks up anything like she did yesterday, I’ll draw a big picture of a pug and label it Pansy Parkinson and then stick it with a Permanent Sticking Charm on the notice board in the common room... Mum always gets mad when I hide her reading glasses. I’ll try that on Greengrass.*

Feeling a little better, now that she knew what to do should any of the other Slytherin girls make her life difficult, Rose wondered if it was too early to go down for breakfast and after a glance at the little silver – she really hated the green-and-silver color scheme – clock on the wall, which proclaimed it six minutes past five, decided it was. Well, she couldn’t just lie around in bed for much longer – she’d probably fall asleep again, and it’d be almost impossible to wake up again. Better to get up right now – up and early was the best motto after all! Well, no it actually wasn’t.

She pulled herself off the bed and dawdled in the toilet, trying to shape her messy, black, earlobe-length hair into something resembling *hair*, instead of a bird’s nest, fidgeting with the extremely-

unflatteringly-cut uniform – it made her look like she was eleven, instead of nearly eleven-and-a-quarter –, and making faces at the vampirishly-pale, little girl who stared back at her from the mirror. It wasn't for nothing that Neville had labeled her a mutant, rabid vampire during an argument when they were both nine.

Fifteen minutes later, she swung into the dormitory, fully dressed and completely bored. One of the girls had awoken – the blonde. She was lying on her back, reading the History of Magic textbook. She managed to tear her eyes from the fascinating tome when Rose dropped in. The blonde scrutinized Rose carefully for all of half-a-second, before offering her a cool nod, and returning back to her enthralling textbook. Rose, not liking the coolly dismissive look on her face, plopped down onto the girl's bed with a big bounce, hoping to annoy her. It didn't work – the girl shifted so that Rose could fit onto the bed more comfortably, but went on reading.

"You like history?" Rose asked after she'd deemed they'd had enough silent communion.

"Mmm..." the girl intoned, flicking a strand of blond hair from her face.

"I'm Rose. Rose Potter," she added.

"Mmm..." the girl's eyes never wavered from her book.

"And your name is?" Rose suggested, wondering whether the girl had been christened Mmm. She certainly seemed to be fond enough of that signature catchphrase, just as Rose was very fond of the insult "Imbecile" and Ron, when he felt particularly disdainful, of calling everyone around him (no matter their age or level of maturity) "naïve children", his long nose high in the air.

"Mm..." the girl stopped herself in time and looked up for a second, eyes a trifle cool and haughty. "Daphne Greengrass," she said curtly, and then dived back into her book. Clearly, the girl had developed no social skills in eleven years – Rose decided to pitch in and play her part in transforming the Girl-who-Lives-in-Weird-Books into something resembling a normal human.

“One of my friends likes history too,” Rose said. “Ron Weasley – he’s in Ravenclaw.”

She was met with a dreamy mmm. She decided to plough on bravely in her quest. “Did you want to be in Ravenclaw?”

“Mmm,” the girl shook her head at the last minute. Rose decided to take that as a no. “If you didn’t want to be in Ravenclaw, then why are you reading the History of Magic textbook at five in the morning?” she demanded testily. “That is considered normal behavior for only Ravenclaws.”

“I like history,” the girl – Rose had nearly forgotten her name was Daphne – mumbled. “It’s fun.”

The only person of Rose’s acquaintance who could call history fun was Ron. He had the cursed scar on his forehead as an excuse for addled brains. Daphne did not.

“Are your parents, erm, alive?” Rose asked as delicately as she could. Maybe poor Daphne’s parents had been butchered when she was six just like Ron’s and her curse scar was just invisible. That would explain the weirdness.

Daphne was startled into looking up. “My father isn’t,” she said coldly, fingers tightening on her book. “He died when I was two.”

Rose guessed that meant that her mother was still alive. “You have any brothers or sisters?” she asked curiously.

The girl shook her head, making an annoyed *pfft* sound, and turned a page. She was reading the chapter on the Goblin Riots, post-Wizarding Seclusion. *Merlin, how boring can you get?* Rose thought in awe. Even *Ron* had admitted that those riots were dull.

“Do you know any of the others well?” Rose asked, thumping her legs on the bed, trying to annoy Daphne. Daphne shook her head slightly, her eyes riveted on her darling book.

“It’s no use trying to get her to speak,” a lazy voice said. Rose turned her head. The heavy-set girl was peering at them, the covers up to

her chin. She smiled slightly, "Millicent Bulstrode. I live right next to them."

"Rose Potter," Rose bounced up from Daphne's bed and bounced onto Millicent's. There was no space for Millicent to move on the bed – she was so very wide. Rose had to make do, perching on the very edge of the bed.

"Daphne's *always* like that," Millicent explained dismissively. "She's perfected the Princess in the Tower act to an art. We poor plebeians must await her royal pleasure to introduce ourselves – it's always been that way. Don't expect anything else." She eyed Rose curiously, and then said quite abruptly, "I suppose you're not a pureblood?"

"No. Half," Rose said coldly, preparing to bounce up from Millicent's bed. "My mother's a Muggleborn."

"I'm halfblood too," Millicent said, surprisingly, smiling warmly. "My great-grandmother was a Muggleborn. I hoped there'd be at least another halfblood in the girls' dorm – I mean, if everyone else was pureblood I'd feel kind of low – my brother John's the only halfblood in his dorm, and he tells me it feels pretty bad sometimes to, you know, be the only one with mixed blood and stuff."

"Me too," a high-pitched, rather breathy voice that made Rose wince said. The girl with the beautiful hair was leaning on her elbow, watching them curiously. "Tracey Davies. My brother Roger's in Ravenclaw," she announced randomly.

"I've five older brothers," Millicent grinned. "All in Slytherin – except for Robert, he's in Hufflepuff."

"I'm an only child, thank goodness for that," Pansy's voice was snooty, but thankfully not as shrill as Tracey's. It was a nice-ish voice and reminded Rose of Uncle Padfoot's when he was delivering nonsensical speeches full of long words. "I am Pansy Iolanthe Parkinson, daughter to Antigone Selwyn and William Parkinson IV."

*And I am Jesus Christ, the son of God, and thou shalt bow before me for I am thy Messiah,* Rose thought, but decided it wouldn't be polite to say aloud.

Then Pansy swept out of the dormitory, snub nose held high, like a royal state barge on the Thames. Millicent blinked, looked at Rose for a second, and then looked away. Tracey's eyes were shining in admiration. Daphne's nose was still just a hairbreadth away from her textbook. Slowly, the dormitory emptied as the others bustled about getting ready for the day. Rose took the opportunity to inspect the Marauders' Map, which she hadn't opened since she'd been gifted it.

Neville and Malfoy were close to each other in their dormitory. There were four more ink dots in the dormitory marked Theodore Nott, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Blaise Zabini. Ron was in his dormitory, next to a dot labeled Michael Corner, and Hannah was in the Hufflepuff dormitory with Susan Bones, the girl with the skull-scar. Eventually, Neville, Malfoy, and Malfoy's henchmen moved away from the boys' dormitory. Stuffing the map hastily in her trunk, Rose scrambled out of the dormitory, and reached the Common Room just as the boys entered it.

Neville grinned when he saw her and broke free of Malfoy's grip to meet her – Neville and Malfoy were already at the arms-over-shoulders stage of companionship. They walked down to the Great Hall together – Malfoy trailing behind them, looking sulky at being left behind by the boy-who-lived. She began to fill him in about the girls in her dormitory and he, in turn, told her what he'd gathered about the boys. Nott was a nut, Zabini was a pansy, and Crabbe and Goyle were Malfoy's slaves.

They settled at the Slytherin table. The ghost of a tall man with a sinister face in bloodied clothing and chains floated over to them. He inspected them with crafty eyes for a moment, his eyes lingering on Neville's scar – Neville had helpfully cut his muddy-brown fringe just a week ago, for optimum visibility of his famous scar –, and then glided away.

"The Bloody Baron," Malfoy said quietly. "Our resident sprite."

"How come he's all bloody?" Rose asked with interest, tucking into breakfast. The food was delicious.

"Ask him yourself," Malfoy retorted. Rose didn't like him at all. It was a lovely breakfast – aside from the generous dollops of Malfoy. At one

point, thousands – or so it seemed – of owls arrived and even Malfoy was unable to suppress a squeak of surprise. He sounded like a ferret and Rose liked him in his ferrety avatar. Butterscotch (Neville's owl) and Polyxena (Malfoy's eagle-owl) arrived.

"Gran won't be too pleased with me being in Slytherin," Neville said dolefully. "Dad was in Gryffindor and Mum was in Hufflepuff."

"Uncle Padfoot's probably going to burst an artery," Rose sighed, searching for her letter. She attached it to Butterscotch, – she wished she had an owl, but Daddy and Mum had deemed it unnecessary, – who was pecking at Neville's breakfast. "Don't worry," she smirked as Butterscotch flew away. "I've told them you're in Slytherin too. You won't have to tell your Gran."

Neville heaved a sigh of relief. "What's wrong with Slytherin?" Malfoy demanded, looking annoyed. "All my family's been in Slytherin *for* ages. It's the best House there is."

"Uncle Padfoot says it's the worst," Rose retorted. "And he should know – all his family were in Slytherin too."

"Who's Uncle Padfoot?" Malfoy sneered. "A right little blood traitor I bet –"

"For your information," Rose snapped, her temper rising. "He is most certainly not *little*, for another it's not right to call someone a blood traitor because you *can't* –"

"I can do and say anything I want," Malfoy said grandly, waving an airy hand. "I am a *Malfoy*."

"Malfoy, Malfunction, Malevolent, Malicious," Rose sang. "Malign, Malady..."

Neville was grinning but he still said, "Stop it, Rose." Malfoy's face was pink with rage and Goyle was cracking his knuckles threateningly.

"At least I'm not a jumped-up, little halfblood," Malfoy said coldly. "Watch your tongue."

“She’s my friend,” Neville said curtly.

“Of course,” Malfoy said, his pale, pointed face twisting into a smile. “But that doesn’t make her mine.” Neville shrugged as if to say *fair enough*. Professor Snape was striding down the line of Slytherins, handing out timetables.

“Potions, History of Magic, Transfiguration, Charms,” Rose read aloud. “Mmm...”

**000**

“Of course, my father and Professor Snape are good friends, they knew each other from Hogwarts, there’s no doubt about it – we’ll all do excellently in Potions,” Malfoy announced, striding down the stone staircases to the dungeons, with the air of one who owned the place.

“My, my, do I sniff favoritism in the air?” Rose innocently asked the walls. Malfoy threw a malevolent look at her over his shoulder, but wisely refrained from voicing his opinion.

“Mrs. Potter knows Snape too,” Neville said unexpectedly, matching his gait with Malfoy’s. Their footsteps reverberated noisily off of the stone walls, dimly illuminated by flickering tapers, giving Rose the eerie sensation of walking down into a trap. “Remember, Rose? When we were both about six?”

No, my lad, I – unlike Ronald Bilius Weasley – do not remember everything that happened to me at the age of six. She shook her head; she didn’t even know who Professor Snape was, aside from being Potions Teacher at Hogwarts. Was she supposed to?

“Oh,” Neville looked a little uncertain about the matter himself. “Well, um, he came round your house one night and we saw your mum and him, erm, talking, I guess, except for the fact that they kind-of had their wands shoved up each other’s throats.” An awkward silence ensued as Rose racked her brains, trying to remember the incident, and Neville frowned, trying to remember whether it had been real or if it was just his imagination.

"We're here," Malfoy announced suddenly, at the door to a cul-de-sac-esque dungeon. They were quite early, only a small knot of Gryffindors had gathered at the entrance. At their centre was the lean blond boy Mum had helped at the station the day before. The Gryffindors looked up when they heard Malfoy's voice. A twisted leer formed on the Gryffindor blond boy's face and he moved out of the centre of the Gryffindors' knot to step just in front of Malfoy.

Lazily, he flipped his tousled blond curls off his forehead so that they could see his jet-black, skull-shaped scar. Five years had failed to fade Ron's scar. Five years had failed to fade this boy's scar; it didn't look a day old, cut as though with a sharp knife. Rose hated scars, especially forehead scars. Too many people she knew and loved had them.

"You're a Malfoy, aren't you," the boy languidly said. It wasn't a question. Malfoy half-nodded and folded his arms over his chest with a *So-what* expression on his face.

"Narcissa Black's son," he said, still smiling. His hand trailed down to his pocket. Malfoy nodded again, scowling. A Gryffindor sniggered softly and Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles threateningly.

"Well, well," the blond Gryffindor said, twirling around Malfoy. Malfoy's own hand dove to his pocket and the two boys began circling each other as the Gryffindors – and the Slytherins who began to trickle in – watched. "Well, well..."

The boy's dark eyes danced in mirth as he toyed with his wand. "Know my name, little boy?"

"Watch whom you're calling names, Gryffindor," Malfoy snarled, clutching his wand. Rose thought that the Gryffindor was either mad or unusually fond of histrionics.

"Or else what?" the boy snickered. "Going to set your two pet goons on me? There, there, baby, don't cry, Mummy's going to be there to solve everything... and even if Mummy doesn't want to get involved there's always Auntie Bella, isn't there? *Rosaceous!*" He screeched before Malfoy had time to react, face wild.



Nothing happened... except for the fact that Malfoy was pink all over, from the tips of his originally silvery-blond hair to the ends of his formerly shining black shoes. The grinning blond boy returned to the Gryffindors and they began laughing and cheering and slapping him on the back. Pansy, who was right behind Rose, gave a squeak of horror and bowled Neville out of her way in her haste to reach Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle dived on the crowd of Gryffindors with howls befitting a battle field. The tall, dark Slytherin boy with slanting, dark eyes was doubled over with laughter while his companion, a weedy-looking boy, attempted to hide his smile. Millicent and Daphne were clutching each other, laughing. Tracey looked torn between laughter and annoyance, suppressing her smiles as best as she could.

"You beast!" Pansy screamed as Crabbe and Goyle attempted to smash their way towards the blond boy. Rose was glad to see that though he was nimbly dodging them, he still looked wary at the size of their fists. She didn't like Malfoy, but there really wasn't any need to single out a boy just because his mother happened to be Narcissa Black – Rose had no idea why the boy hated her, though that seemed to be the only reason he had attacked Malfoy – and turn him into a human flamingo. Especially on the first day, on the first class of the first day. That was a bit dramatic, even by Uncle Padfoot's standards.

Thankfully, the dungeon door opened before Crabbe and Goyle could transform the Gryffindor into blond mush. A tall, pale man with a curtain of greasy, shoulder-length, black hair framing his hard face looked down at them. Crabbe released the boy's collar – he'd managed to catch him – and Goyle drew back his fist hastily. The boy toppled onto the stone floor but quickly scrambled up again, wincing. Rose hoped his leg was bruised. Pansy began to cry and squeeze Malfoy as everyone burst into explanations.

"Inside," the man said icily and they all fell silent and scrambled in. Neville chose a seat at the front of the room and Rose dropped down beside him. The professor performed the counter-curse on Malfoy and he swept into the seat next to Neville. Only his cheeks were brilliantly pink now.

"You are..." Snape said coldly, looking down at the blond Gryffindor.

“Smith, sir,” he said quickly, now looking nervous.

“Five points from Gryffindor for disruptive and inappropriate conduct. Consider yourself warned,” he said. Smith opened his mouth to protest, expression indignant, but with a small moan, the bushy-haired girl next to him pulled him down. Snape began his class with roll call, scowling. He was one of the ugliest men Rose had ever seen, and his sour face didn’t improve his aesthetic appeal.

He scowled at each student after calling his or her name, though he gave Malfoy a short nod. His eyes narrowed when he read out Neville’s name, but he didn’t even bother to look up and see Neville’s prominently displayed scar. When he called Rose’s name he looked at her and there was a flash of something in his black eyes – sorrow? hurt? anger? – but then he looked down at his registrar again and Rose was sure she had imagined it.

He set them to brewing a potion for mild acne, simple enough, and prowled about the class, sneering at everyone, especially Smith whom he seemed to have taking a disliking to instantly. Smith also seemed to return the favor. After he’d completed about four rounds of the classroom and insulted Smith five times and the rest of the class on an average twice, it slowly dawned on Rose that he hadn’t visited their table at all.

Not that she minded, of course. She was perfectly happy, copying everything Malfoy did, sniggering under her breath at Crabbe and Goyle, and enviously watching Tracey flip her long, beautiful hair. She didn’t need an irritable Potions Teacher, who resembled an overgrown bat, flapping over her lovely concoction. But still, she was a little surprised. Ten minutes before the bell rang he made another last round of the class, inspecting the potions. He had to see their potions.

He nodded at Malfoy’s, had nothing to say to Neville, and looked perfectly disgusted at the large, purple dumpling at the bottom of Goyle’s cauldron and the brilliantly yellow, foul-smelling solution – their potion was supposed to be odorless and dull, dark blue – in Crabbe’s.

He took one quick look at Rose's potion and then muttered under his breath, so low that only she was able to hear him, "Very good, Rose." Then he hurried away, looking as surprised as she felt. He hadn't so much as breathed a word that was not abject condemnation to any student in the class – even bushy-haired Miss Granger who'd created the best potion in class.

000

They had History of Magic with the Ravenclaws and their teacher was a ghost. After about five minutes into class, even Ron gave up trying to take down the notes. The only person who was actually *listening* was Daphne – most of the Ravenclaws watched her in pure wonder – and that was by dint of being an insane history-fanatic. Tracey was playing with her hair and shooting the dark, long-eyed Slytherin boy – Blaise Zabini – coquettish looks. Pansy was doing the same to Malfoy – who was busily ignoring her.

Rose tried different types of signatures and finally decided on a particularly messy scrawl of *R. Potter* – which was so illegible that it could just as well have been *Jkrwle*. Then she decided to try to write with her left hand. She was surprised to find that her signature came out even worse than before. It looked so bad it wasn't even artistic. She decided to improve on her left-handmanship and spent the rest of the lesson practicing the alphabet using her left hand. Rose decided she'd learnt a lot by the end of the class.

Charms passed in a whirl of zooming objects – courtesy of Professor Flitwick – and swishing and flicking their wands – courtesy of the Slytherins and Ravenclaws who shared class together. Rose accidentally set fire to Tracey's hair after more enthusiastic swishing-and-flicking than was necessary and Tracey and Pansy banded together after the lesson, throwing her looks of deepest loathing. Rose knew it was going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship that might leave the female population of the school boyfriend-less at its zenith, what with Tracey's hair and Pansy's bossiness. She could just tell.

In Transfiguration, they began transforming needles into matchsticks. Ron was the only one who really mastered it and earned himself an

approving smile from the strict Professor McGonagall. The rest of the class earned itself a lecture on how slow they were and how brilliantly Hermione Granger from Gryffindor had performed in class – Rose remembered the bushy-haired girl from Potions with the best potion – and homework.

## ***Truly Impressive Feats on a Broomstick***

*“Darkness and light are merely matters of perspective.”*

*- Severus Snape to Lily Evans*

*Dear Rose,*

*We’re very happy that you’re in Slytherin! Never mind what Uncle Padfoot says – Slytherin most certainly does not equal to evil. One of my school-friends used to be in Slytherin and he turned out to be a fine man. Mrs. Longbottom was all for sending Neville a Howler, but we managed to talk her out of it. Don’t worry about Uncle Padfoot, he can be very irrational at times and he does have a natural bias against Slytherin – it’s unreasonable, yes, but I suppose it takes all types of people to make a world – and he’s getting used to the idea.*

*Now, here’s our big news – we’re going to have a baby! I’m so excited, now I won’t be so lonely when both you and Harry are away at Hogwarts! We’re expecting it around early June, just before you come home for the holidays. Old Miss Bagshot made a rock cake for you – she’s always been very fond of you, even though she doesn’t show it! It really was dreadful and I had to throw it away. I’ve sent a box of Every-Flavor Beans – your favorite – for you. Don’t eat it all at once and do be careful with them.*

*I’m a bit rushed at the moment but I’ll write again soon. We all miss you very much – even Harry. I can’t wait for Christmas so you can come back home.*

*With Love,*

*Mum*

It was the second week of their first term and Rose had stopped *really* missing them – home was home and she felt obliged to miss it, but Hogwarts was *Hogwarts* and that was enough for her. Sure, she still missed sunlit streaming into her bedroom and waking her up – the dorms and the Common Room were underground – and she missed her tree-house and sneaking off to the kitchen to get a snack

whenever she woke up at midnight and... well, she missed a lot of things. But it was okay. It was okay.

"Filthy Gryffindor," Malfoy snarled, peering up over his cup of coffee at a troupe of first-year Gryffindors entering the Hall. He still hadn't gotten over Smith jinxing him on the first day. "Bet *he* thinks he's somebody special, little pest... Well, he isn't, he's just an unwashed, unclean, disgusting, little..."

"You drink coffee at home?" Neville interrupted, looking surprised. "My Gran doesn't let me; she says I'm too young and that it's a disgraceful, American habit that ought not to be cultivated in properly reared up children." Rose grinned. She was used to Mrs. Longbottom's long tirades against Americans and her fetish for what she termed properly reared up children. Well, not exactly a fetish in the proper, Uncle-Padfoot-defined sense of that term, but yeah, she had a thing for properly reared up children. Well, not really a thing either because that sounded pretty gross too; more of an attraction to, and no, that sounded odd... Rose decided that there were too many sexually-related synonyms in the world – you couldn't even hit upon an innocent word, even if you tried. Spoke volumes, really, about society.

"My grandmother says that too," Malfoy said absently, his attention successfully diverted from Smith. Rose suspected that had been Neville's purpose – they'd been listening to Malfoy rant about unwashed, unclean, disgusting, little Gryffindors all through last week. It had culminated at seven o'clock last night in Rose taking up her History of Magic book and hurtling it with all her might at Malfoy's head, resulting in the formation of a beautiful, blue bruise against Malfoy's pale temples and The Cold Shoulder Treatment for Rose from Pansy a.k.a. I-have-decided-to-become-Mrs.-Malfoy and Tracey a.k.a. I-am-Pansy's-Willing-Slave.

Blaise – Rose decided he was good-looking enough for her to address him by his first name – had applauded her and Malfoy had thrown his *Standard Book of Spells Grade 1* at her. Luckily, his aim and strength were nowhere near as good as hers and she'd escaped with a small paper-cut. Of course, he would have achieved a much better result if he'd put Crabbe and Goyle to slaughtering her, but

Neville had intervened before the idea occurred to thick-brained Malfoy. Thankfully, Malfoy respected Neville's scar enough to listen to him. For now, at least.

"He'll be wearing his ribcage as a hat if he ever dares meddle with *me* again," Malfoy growled, not dissuaded in the least from the topic of the day – bloodthirsty plans for the demise of Smith. "I'll wrap his intestines around the Whomping Willow and feed his tiny, tiny brain to starving Hippogriffs and..."

Rose snorted eloquently.

"What's your problem, now?" he snapped, whirling around to face her, cheeks pink.

"Nothing," Rose said innocently. "I've seen plenty of *children* –" she put a world of emphasis on that little word, smirking at his expression, "– like you. They talk big, sure they do, but when it comes to the action –" she slapped her palm on the table, her face angelic and innocent, "– you find out that they're, well, short of a few vital parts." Rose favored him with a bright grin, feeling proud of her little speech. It was copied almost word-for-word from one Uncle Padfoot had delivered once.

Instead of saying something obnoxious or turning away in disgust, Malfoy's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You copied that from someone," he said quietly, frowning. "I'm pretty sure you did," he said, more firmly.

Rose raised her eyebrows, smiling. "Whatever would make you think that, Muffin?"

"You sound like my Aunt Bella," he stated abruptly. "She says things like that." He frowned, looking as though he wanted to say something more. He probably might have – he didn't exactly keep his thoughts to himself – if Pansy had not chosen that exact moment to sweep into the Hall and practically onto his lap. He swerved quickly to avoid her, his hair brushing Rose's shoulder, and mumbled indistinguishable something to Pansy before practically jumping out of his seat and scrambling away. Neville threw off Pansy, who was now swerving onto *his* lap, and followed Draco at a trot.

Rose would probably have fled with them, except she still hadn't finished her last pancake. She had a good appetite – she'd taken five pancakes – and saw no reason in deserting her beautiful breakfast just because of a stupid girl. Besides, she was brave – even if the Hat had put her in Slytherin, where she was still quite sure she did not belong – and not in the least scared of Pansy, unlike Draco.

"He's an odd boy, isn't he?" Rose cooed to Pansy. "If I were you, I wouldn't set my sights on mating with him."

Pansy sighed, looking very world-weary. "Mamma thinks it would look nice on the Family Tapestry if I were to marry a Malfoy," she explained, digging into breakfast. "It's not my fault that the Malfoy heir is such a..." she waved her hands around wildly, as though seeking a word.

"Pompous prat? Bratty, little git? In dire need of more masculine hair?" Rose suggested.

"All three," Pansy groaned. "But I've made up my mind to marry him and there's nothing he can do about it."

"I can see why you're in Slytherin," Rose said sincerely. "Ambition, resourcefulness, manipulation... they're all written on your face."

Pansy looked pleased. "Thank you," she said graciously.

"It wasn't a compliment," Rose said frankly, throwing the last piece of pancake into her mouth and getting up.

**000**

Defense Against the Dark Arts was their last class on Friday. Professor Quirrell was a pale, little man with a twitchy body and a magnificent purple-and-gold turban that covered his head. He also had a highly pronounced stutter. In their first class, he'd been terribly excited – and his appendages all appropriately twitchy – when he called out Neville's name during roll call. He'd actually gotten up from his desk and shaken – or rather, *wrung* – Neville's hand, all the while stammering that he was honored, delighted, so very proud to teach



him... and numerous compliments that they couldn't decipher over his stutter.

They were practicing Blasting Curses that day. It was very fun because they could aim their wands at anything and then try to blast it – Rose loved the noise. Of course, the full effect of the curse would create a brilliant, second-long flash of light, and the noise produced would equal the sound of an average of seven wine-glasses shattering simultaneously and would blast the object a few feet away – that was the textbook definition. But, of course, no one had achieved more than half the effect – with the exception of Rose, who'd reached three-quarters of the effect. It was the only class she was top in.

Professor Quirrell didn't seem to mind that they weren't doing it correctly. He smiled and stuttered and swept about the class repairing the cushions they were practicing on and praising all and sundry. He never corrected anyone and so Rose considered him very nice – he was much better than strict Professor McGonagall, who did not seem to grasp the concept of *Spare the homework, spoil the student*.

"Beautiful, Miss Potter! Charming, charming, Mr. Malfoy! Ah – yes, good, good Mr. Crabbe! And you too, Mr. Goyle!" he cried enthusiastically, swerving towards them, beaming, despite the fact that Malfoy was banging his wand against the table, angry that Rose was doing so much better than him, and Crabbe and Goyle were staring dumbly at their wands, as though unsure of what to do.

"Excellent, simply excellent, Mr. Longbottom!" he cried, as Neville aimed a perfectly mediocre Blasting Curse. "You have so much ability, such talent!" he cried brightly, patting Neville on the back. Rose stuck out her tongue at him behind Quirrell's back, to which he smirked and made a face. Malfoy rolled his eyes and mouthed, "Very Mature," at both of them.

"I do wish you would join me for a cup of tea in my office today!" Quirrell beamed down at Neville some more. "Such gift, such grace and flair – very rare, very, very rare in so young a wizard!" he exclaimed. Neville flushed pink and smiled, nodding. He was putty in

the hands of anyone who could successfully administer praise to him. Quirrell looked like his face was going to explode from all that beaming. “Charming, charming!” he cooed, “Well then, class dismissed!”

He dismissed them about half-an-hour before the bell rang. Without waiting for their startled exclamations, he towed Neville – who was desperately clutching his bag – towards his office, smiling serenely.

000

Rose stomped out of the library, bored and frustrated beyond her mind. What was she supposed to *do*? Quirrell and Neville had been cozily closeted in Quirrell’s office for the past half-hour and Rose was pretty sure they were going to continue whatever they were doing there for the next few half-hours.

Rose and Neville were inseparable at Hogwarts, except for their dormitories and at the toilet – they went everywhere together, with Malfoy trailing behind them, and his goons trailing behind him. She’d tried tagging behind Ron after their Defense Class ended early but he’d just gone to the library – he was a Ravenclaw through and through – and been joined presently by bushy-haired Miss Granger.

They’d actually formed a *study* group with Padma Patil and Michael Corner. After spending a few minutes with them, Rose lost all faith in Ron’s ability to make normal friends. Padma and Michael were bad enough but *Hermione* (What kind of a name was that? *Who* were her parents?!), Rose shuddered, – trying to put as much distance as she could between the annoying, little know-it-all and herself.

She stepped outside, breathing in the crisp autumn air. She could always spend time with the other Slytherin girls but she’d never really gotten on with girls – as several misadventures (ranging from accidentally throwing a girl off the roof and stuffing their pillows with beetles during a slumber party) with Hannah Abbotts’ gang bore testimony to. Besides, Daphne Greengrass was not really the type of girl one spent one’s free time with – you only went to her if you wanted to finish your History homework. And Pansy had established her position as Queen Bee amongst Tracey and Millicent. That would

mean that if Rose joined their group she would have to play the role of Worker Bee.

Which would most *definitely* not work out.

She glanced around the grounds and saw students scattered all over the place, laughing, chatting, snogging... She caught sight of Malfoy's silvery-blond hair shining in the sunlight and decided to take the plunge a.k.a. join him and his goons. There honestly was nothing else she could do.

She moved towards them and sat down gingerly beside him, limbs drawn together in a ball. Crabbe and Goyle had been laughing at one of Malfoy's pathetic attempts at jokes – she suspected they were paid to do so – but abruptly stopped when she dropped on the scene. She studiously ignored them, minutely examining her non-existent nails, and gradually, they picked up the pace of their conversation, which centered on the topic of Quidditch. Before she knew it, she was listening to them. Before they knew it, she had unfurled her arms and legs and was half-sprawled out on the grass like Malfoy.

“...A Comet Two Sixty but I'll bully Father into buying me a Nimbus Two Thousand and then come next year...” Malfoy was saying, waving his pale hands enthusiastically. His eyes were sparkling with infectious pleasure.

“When did you learn to fly?” she asked him, speaking for the first time.

He eyed her warily, and then decided the question was not so dangerous after all. “Since when I was seven. Father taught me,” he said briefly.

Rose snorted in contempt. “Uncle Padfoot's been training me since I was *four*.” It was the truth. Mum had not approved of it – especially when Rose had fallen off her broomstick once and plummeted thirty feet to the ground – but nothing she said or did could dampen Rose's enthusiasm for Quidditch, or Uncle Padfoot's enthusiasm for teaching her it. Usually with disastrous results, of course.

Malfoy glared at her. “I don't believe you,” he said flatly, half-rising.

“Well, I don’t believe a ferrety, little midget like you could ever get up on a broom by yourself,” Rose said brightly.

“You talk big,” he sneered. “But when it comes to action...”

“You’re not big enough to throw back my own speeches at me, kiddo,” she snapped.

“Prove it,” he said blandly.

“Prove what?”

“That you’re really as good as you claim you are,” Malfoy said.

Rose never claimed she was good, just that she’d started pretty early. But now, considering the matter... yeah, she was sure she was much better at Quidditch than this little brat. “Fine. How?” she asked curtly.

“A match,” he drawled, looking at her as if she was more than a bit dim. “Now. School brooms...”

“*Duh*,” she snorted.

“We’ll use one of those old Snitches they keep – Flint will give us one if we ask – because they’re not as fast.” He smiled, looking at her as if he expected her to reject his offer. “*You* won’t be able to lose it even if you try then.”

“Fine,” she shrugged, trying to look bored. “It doesn’t really matter to me, competing with amateurs.”

**000**

Marcus Flint, the Slytherin Quidditch Captain, was a large fifth-year who looked as though he had some troll blood in him. He not only agreed to supply them with an old Snitch but also decided to attend their little match. Malfoy had protested violently at this, but Flint had overridden his protests with the threat of taking back the Snitch.

In the stadium, a sullen-looking Malfoy and a very cheerful Rose mounted the rickety, old school brooms. Rose couldn’t help but notice

that Malfoy was riding his broom the wrong way – but she knew enough not to tell him that. An obnoxiously cheerful-looking Flint – nothing was more enjoyable than watching mouthy first-years, like Malfoy, make fools of themselves, Rose suspected – released the tiny, faded, old Snitch.

The Slytherin first-years – except Neville, who was still with Quirrell – were in the stands, along with half of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Pansy's gang and Malfoy's goons were cheering for him, Daphne, looking very dreamy, and Blaise – who hated Malfoy – were cheering for her.

Rose soared into the air on the dreadful broom, laughing outright in delight. This was truly where she belonged, always had been. With Uncle Padfoot, Star Beater of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, and Daddy, who could have played Chaser for England - as Mummy proudly said - how could it be otherwise? Malfoy hadn't a chance in the world, she knew and didn't care that she was displaying the same level of confidence amounting to arrogance in her abilities that Neville displayed in his.

She hadn't flown in two weeks, a long time for her. The broom didn't seem to want to obey her – that was the trouble with old chessmen and old brooms as Daddy had told her, they were highly opinionated things – but she was glad to see that Malfoy was having an even harder time with his broom. The brooms bucked through the air as the two fliers squinted for the Snitch, rising and dropping in the air.

Malfoy wasn't half-bad, she decided. Sure, he rode his broom the wrong way and he wasn't as graceful as she was, but he was still much better than Ron, and much, *much* better than Neville. In fact, she could call him half-good instead of half-bad. She wasn't focusing on locating the Snitch actually, just watching Malfoy, dipping and swerving through the air, the sunlight glinting off his sleek blond head...

Their little match didn't last for too long for the simple reason that the Snitch practically shoved itself up her nose when she was looking the other way - at Malfoy. Of course, to the people a hundred feet below the feat probably looked truly impressive due to its quickness – the

match had lasted roughly two minutes – and they cheered for her as if she'd made a spectacular catch when in reality it was nothing of the sort but pure luck... Grinning, she clutched the Snitch in her fist, waving it wildly about as she flew down, Blaise clapping harder than ever, and even Crabbe and Goyle grinning.

Malfoy dropped down a few seconds after, looking highly disgruntled. He even let Pansy coo over him, his face twisted into an angry leer. Flint ran towards her, a broad grin on his trollish face and thumped her on the back. She supposed the thump was meant to be encouraging and come in the way of a light pat-on-the-back. In reality, it had enough force to send her buckling to her knees.

"Brilliant! Ruddy brilliant!" he roared and the other Slytherin players agreed loudly with him, all grinning. "We need kids like you on the team!" "Well done, er..."

"Potter," she said. Flint shook her hand - wrung it, really - solemnly and said something about new Seekers and Professor Snape and the rule about first-years. Rose went through it in a blaze of post-win euphoria, a joyful suspicion that she was going to be rewarded magnificently for being so lucky tugging at her.

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"*Engorgio!*" Rose moaned, swinging her wand wildly. She hated little, heart-shaped, pink pamphlets with a passion. She hated having to enlarge them into larger, *precisely* heart-shaped pamphlets with an even greater passion. But the greatest frenzy of passionate hate was reserved for Minerva A. McGonagall (and she still didn't know what the A. stood for).

"It's not like that," Ron said mildly, turning around to look at her. He had finished enlarging his pamphlet within ten minutes of 'comprehending' the theory – his words – and had even taken the liberty of patterning it with delicate, little, white-and-red hearts. Naturally, McGonagall had been delighted, awarding Ravenclaw ten points and having a little chat with Ron about dear, dear, little Miss Granger.

Halfway into the class, even Neville and Malfoy had finished their pamphlets and were eying Rose with mild interest, in between games of knots-and-crosses. The only people who had failed to enlarge their pamphlets were confirmed dunces like Crabbe-and-Goyle, a hysterical and thoroughly heartbroken Ravenclaw, who was sobbing aloud to McGonagall that he didn't deserve to *be* a Ravenclaw – with which sentiment McGonagall seemed to be agreeing heartily – and Rose.

“Oh, shut *up*,” Rose snarled, accidentally setting fire to her pamphlet. Neville hastily put the fire out with his hat, while Rose stared down gloomily at her charred pamphlet. It was just the third week of first year but she already knew she'd get the lowest grade ever achieved by witch-kind on her Transfiguration O.W.L.

“You just need to focus on what you want to do,” Ron continued patiently.

“What does it look like I'm doing?” Rose snapped.

“Brandishing your wand like a baboon,” Malfoy sniggered, patting his own pamphlet fondly.

“Watch it, or the next thing that'll be on fire is *you*,” Rose said, eyes flashing murderously. Instead of looking frightened, he simply looked amused – something that Rose considered downright insulting to her ability to strike fear into the hearts of men and mice. She had always been the one to scare off – or slaughter – errant mice whilst in the company of Abbott-and-Co – all of whom were petrified of rodents.

“Excuse me, Professor,” a thick voice said at the door. Marcus Flint stood in the doorway, eying McGonagall warily as she scowled at him. “But I'm supposed to take Potter to the Headmaster's Office, right now.”

“Can't it wait?” McGonagall demanded, frowning at Rose and her still-un-enlarged pamphlet.

Flint shrugged as if to say, On-your-own-head-be-it-then.

“Very well, I suppose,” McGonagall said ungraciously. “Miss Potter, I want half-a-foot of parchment on Enlarging Spells, by tomorrow. Dismissed.”

Rose nodded and rose, seething. Hate was not a word large enough for the emotion she felt for McGonagall.

“What’s this for?” she demanded as soon as she was out of the classroom. She jogged along beside Flint who was easily a foot-and-a-half taller than her – if not more.

“You on the Slytherin Quidditch Team,” Flint said, striding briskly down the hallways. Rose gave up the pretence and began running along beside him, barely just meeting his footsteps. “He wants to have a talk with you – odd one, he is.”

“So, I’ll be on the team?” she squeaked, hardly daring to believe it. “Even though I’m a first-year and...”

He brushed it off, a slight smile on his trollish face. “You’re a good kid. I’m sure he’ll let you, just smile a bit and nod. I’ve put in a good word for you, I asked Snape about it and he said I might do as I pleased but he wouldn’t risk the dangers of putting an eleven-year-old on a broom against the chance of her falling...you won’t fall off, will you?” he asked, looking anxious.

“Last time I fell off a broom was when I was four,” she told him, huffing.

“What about Bludgers?” he demanded, looking at her beadily.

“I’m not scared of them,” she said.

He shrugged. “You’re a good kid,” he repeated, “And we need a Seeker anyhow. Coconut Cream,” he announced calmly as they reached a large and extremely ugly, stone gargoyle. This was evidently the password because the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life, and hopped aside as the wall behind him split into two. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase moving smoothly upwards. As she and Flint stepped onto it, Rose heard the wall thud closed behind them. They rose upwards in circles, higher and higher, until at last, slightly



dizzy, Rose spotted a gleaming oak door ahead, with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin.

“Well, this is it,” Flint said, looking apprehensive, eyes darting around the empty room. He clapped her on the shoulder so that Rose’s knees buckled under her. “Good luck,” he said quickly and hurried out.

It was a very interesting room, Rose decided. Even more interesting than Uncle Padfoot’s apartment, which was so interesting that Mum considered it indecent. The room was large and beautiful, full of funny, little noises. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was an enormous, swan-sized bird with magnificent scarlet-and-gold feathers that Rose recognized – from books Uncle Moony had sent her – as a phoenix. It was dozing at the moment and Rose stared at it in awe for a couple of moments before focusing on the room again.

A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, and sitting on a shelf behind it, the shabby, tattered Sorting Hat.

It seemed to sense that someone else was in the room, someone very interested in it, for suddenly, a split appeared in its brim and it began to talk – or rather wheeze out a few words. “Ah, there you are again, my dear.”

“Erm, hello to you too,” Rose replied, feeling very wrong-footed at the moment. Mum had taught her how to treat everyone politely. Everyone, except talking Hats.

“In case you were wondering,” the Hat said. “Yours wasn’t the longest Sorting ever. You sat barely two minutes on the stool. Poor little Cadmus Peverell took just five minutes under an hour, practically in hysterics after I let him go.” The Hat chuckled.

“I don’t think you’re very nice,” Rose said, feeling that it was alright to be impertinent to a thousand-year-old Hat. “I was nearly in hysterics.”

“Well, I deserve to have some fun once in a while, don’t you think?” the Hat asked, sounding waspish. “It’s the dullerest thing really, my dear, duller than you would think, being a Hat. I used to have meaningful conversations with Phineas – charming man he was, truly charming – but Albus...” the Hat trailed off, sounding disgruntled.

“What house was Cadmus Sorted in?” Rose asked. “And what were you two talking about for an hour?”

“Hufflepuff,” the Hat answered. “And he’s Master Peverell to you, dearie, he’s been dead and gone these past eight hundred years or thereabouts...” The Hat chuckled as if it could see her thunderstruck expression. “Ah, those were the days, when Sortings could last ten minutes at a time, when time itself was just another term, not like now, oh no...Albus has expressly forbidden me from lengthening my Sortings to over five minutes...” The Hat actually sniffed. “But then he was under me for a quarter of an hour, and his little brother even longer...”

“Having a pleasant conversation?” a mild voice from behind Rose asked. Rose whirled about and tried to squeak out something but the Headmaster merely smiled kindly at her and gestured towards a chair. As she collapsed into it, she wondered how she could have *not* heard him coming in.

“She’s a charming, little girl, impudent yes, but charming,” the Hat said benignly. “Reminds me so of dear Phineas...”

The Headmaster chuckled and took a seat. “Chocolate Frog?” he suggested, handing one to her.

Numbly, Rose bit the frog’s leg off before she realized that she wasn’t here to chit-chat but to apply for the Slytherin Quidditch Team. The Headmaster must think her childish for accepting a Frog like a ten-year-old. If he thought her too childish, he wouldn’t let her play.

“I-er,” she mumbled, not knowing what to say, not knowing whether to go on eating or hand the legless frog back to him.

“No doubt I gave you a fright,” the Headmaster smiled. “You must let me recompense you.”

Rose had no idea what that meant but guessed she ought to go on eating the frog. Hastily, she swallowed the frog while the Headmaster – and possibly, the Hat – looked benevolently down upon her.

“Well,” the Headmaster said after she’d finished. “Mr. Flint has informed me of his wish for you to play the part of Seeker for Slytherin. He has asked me to waive the rule against first-years playing for their teams for you. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” Rose said quickly, a little too quickly.

He smiled benignly down at her. “What is your opinion of the matter?”

“Wha-?” she asked and then stopped mid-sentence. “I, er, want to play too. And, erm, I’m sure I won’t fall off my broom or crack my head open or, well, do something like that.”

“If you could say that with a little more confidence –”

“I want to play,” Rose repeated firmly. “And there’s no way I can fall off my broom. Meaning no disrespect of course,” she added quickly, feeling that she was being impudent again.

“Why not?” the Headmaster asked. “Why can’t you fall off your broom, my dear girl?”

“I’ve been playing ever since I was the size of a snidget,” Rose explained. “The last time I fell off was when I was four and that was because I crashed into a tree.”

The Headmaster winced. “It must have been painful, I gather.”

“Very,” Rose grinned, remembering how Mum had screamed at Uncle Padfoot.

“Well, then I see no difficulties ahead. You have confidence in your abilities and that is all I ask for,” the Headmaster smiled. “Play to your strengths, my dear.”

Rose stood up. “Thank you, sir,” she said and quickly exited the room. The Headmaster might be eccentric but he was one of the nicest

people she'd ever met. Plus, he had two very interesting pets – the phoenix and the Hat.

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"He let me," she sang, dancing towards the Slytherin Table. Flint smiled, patted her head, called her a good kid again, and told her when practice would be held.

"He let me," she sang, dancing towards Malfoy and Neville. She gave the thumbs-up sign to Ron, who was finishing his dinner at the Ravenclaw table. He waved at her, smiling broadly, then turned back to bushy-haired Miss Granger, who'd arrived from the Gryffindor table.

"Good one," Neville said thickly, through a mouthful of treacle tart. "I always knew you'd be on the team."

Malfoy glared at her malevolently, his pale eyes narrowed to slits. "I bet you think you're special," he hissed.

"I don't *bet* it," Rose snorted, tucking into her own dinner. "I *know* it."

Malfoy snorted in reply. Eventually the girls drifted over. Daphne smiled dreamily at Rose and told her that she was the youngest player in roughly a hundred and seven years. Tracey squealed in excitement, bright eyes teary, and threw her arms dramatically around Rose, crying that Rose was simply *wonderful*. Millicent attempted to do the same but with disastrous results – if it had not been for Crabbe-and-Goyle, Rose would probably have suffocated in her hug a.k.a. death-grip.

Pansy frowned at her and dropped down beside Malfoy. "It's not in the least ladylike," she sniffed, frowning at Tracey and Millicent disapprovingly. "My father would take a birch rod to me if I *ever* played Quidditch."

"My father would take a birch rod to me if I *never* played Quidditch," Rose answered, looking straight at Pansy.

Their eyes, coal-black and emerald-green, locked together and, for one moment, they knew each other simply and completely. Then the

moment passed and Pansy, blushing as if caught in an indecent strip-show, turned to Malfoy and cooed, "But you're wonderful too, Draco, why I *know*..."

And Rose turned to Tracey and cooed, "How *do* you put up with that lovely young lady, darling?"

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*Dear Uncle Padfoot,*

*The smiley in your last letter – it was more like a note, actually, seeing as it contained less than ten words – looked constipated. You can stop being mad at me for being in Slytherin, though; I've got good news for you.*

*I'm playing Seeker on the Slytherin Quidditch Team. Now trying telling me that I'm not living up to your legacy and you're not my godfather any more.*

*Lots of love,*

*Rose*

"I might faint from joy," Sirius whispered. "I never believed for a moment that she was anything but my goddaughter, brilliant to the core, the loveliest, dearest, cleverest..."

"And there he goes again," Lily muttered to James and they both chuckled together, listening to Sirius sing Rose's praises.

## ***Stumbling onto a Mystery***

*"You're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view."*

*- Obi-Wan Kenobi*

*Dear Rose,*

*I knew you'd make me proud of you, I simply knew it. Of course, I never suspected that you would be anything but brilliant – being my goddaughter, of course – never, ever (let's both pretend the Slytherin Incident never happened, shall we?). I knew you'd play on your Quidditch Team – I'd have been shocked and might have needed therapy had you not played – but in your first-year, just three weeks from the start of term...*

*Well, my expectations for you were always high, but, my dear girl, you've managed to outshine them! Well done and buy yourself whatever you feel like with this little pittance – don't mention it to your mother, of course, she might not think twenty-five Galleons is a pittance for an eleven-year-old, but then, of course, her ideas of how much money young persons should receive have always been peculiar...*

*And, of course, you deserve all of it – and more, indeed – being...*

It went on for roughly five pages, complete with smiley-faces and snitches drawn clumsily in the margins. A shower of brightly gleaming Galleons, simply craving to be spent, tumbled in a shower of gold onto Rose's lap.

"He's mad, he is, whoever sent you that," Malfoy observed, peering over her shoulder. "Even my *father* doesn't let me have more than five Galleons at a time with me!" He pouted, looking unhappy at the amount of money Rose had been sent.

"Nobody said you could read my mail," Rose replied, swatting absently at his pointed face. The letter from Uncle Padfoot had arrived just as quickly as she'd expected. It was night and they were all in the Slytherin Common Room – Malfoy and his thugs had

managed to secure the most comfortable chairs near the fire for them – relaxing, having just completed their homework. Laucia, Uncle Padfoot's owl, hadn't even waited for breakfast the next morning to deliver the letter.

*...There is nothing more that I can add. You are my goddaughter through and through, and that is the highest compliment I could ever deliver. I suppose you could always be called your father's daughter too – he's bursting with pride he is, but he won't send you twenty-five Galleons, my girl – and perhaps your mother's too, though Harry seems to fill the post of Mama's Boy quite adequately.*

*As for your broomstick...expect a surprise tomorrow morning. :)*

*A Windfall of Adoration,*

*Uncle Padfoot*

"Who's Uncle Padfoot?" Malfoy demanded, finishing the letter just as she rolled it up.

"My godfather," she replied coolly, swatting at his face again.

He scowled and ducked out of reach of her hand. "I gathered that from the letter – he seems pretty proud of you for living up to his godfatherly expectations. It's mentioned quite a few times."

"Nine times," Rose answered, watching Neville read a book. Blaise, Tracey, and Millicent were all seated cross-legged on the floor, playing Gobstones.

"But *who* is it?" Malfoy persisted. "And is his name really Padfoot?"

"You *are* as stupid as you look," Rose said sweetly. "I suppose nothing is impossible in this world."

"I do try," Malfoy said modestly. He leaned back in his moss-green, velvet armchair, curling his toes encased in silk socks towards the fire.

"I suspect it's not hard for you," Nott said coldly, looking up from his chessboard. "You barely need to try." He was playing chess with Pansy.

Malfoy waved his dainty, white hands gracefully. "Well said, my loyal minion – for once." Pansy giggled in admiration. The next moment she called out brightly, "Checkmate!" and Nott scowled in response. Rose was forced to change her opinion of Pansy as nothing but a man-catching, self-obsessed bimbo with a Queen-Bee-Complex – very few people managed to win a game of chess against Nott. And those who did win games were usually above their fifth year.

"What're you reading?" she called out to Neville. He looked up for a moment and showed her the cover of the large, black leather book. Peeling letters, once golden, proclaimed it to be *Il lure di mistero, bellezza dell'oscurità*.

"Is that French?" she asked.

"No, Italian," he replied absently, turning back to the book.

"Neville," she said patiently. "You can't read Italian." He nodded.

"Then why are you reading it, if you *can't* read it?" Rose demanded, feeling annoyed.

"It's Italian on one side and there are English translations on the other side," he said and intercepted her question before she could ask it. "You can't have it."

"Where did you get it from?" Malfoy asked interestedly.

"Quirrell."

"By the way," Rose said. "You never did tell me what you were doing while you were holed up with him."

"You never asked me."



"I forget," she said lamely. It was true; she'd been so excited after the impromptu Quidditch Match with Malfoy that the matter of Neville-and-Quirrell had escaped her mind.

"You forget a lot of things," Malfoy said pleasantly. "Leads one to wondering how much you knew in the first place."

"More than you in any case," Rose snapped.

"Oh shut up," Neville sighed. "You're always having a go at each other."

"That's because he's a-"

"Well, she's the-"

"Spring is in the air," Blaise murmured from the carpet, and Pansy scowled at them.

"I was just talking with Quirrell, alright?" Neville said, a little more roughly than the occasion warranted.

"What about?" Rose demanded promptly.

"Stuff, the usual," he said, absently rubbing his scar, avoiding her eyes. "Oh, you know, scars, books – he gave this to me, said it'd make interesting background reading material, no Theodore, you can't have it – just *stuff*..." He said with emphasis. "He wants me down to tea with him next week too, and I think the week after, and..."

"We get the point," Malfoy grinned. "He wants to set up a tea-circle cum fanclub."

Neville smiled slowly. "I think so." He stood up, not even glancing at Rose, and yawned widely – and fakely. "I'd best be going up to bed, then..."

*There's something off about him,* Rose thought, watching him trudge up the stairs to the boys' dormitories. *I wish I knew what it was.*

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True to Uncle Padfoot's promise, Rose got a surprise the next morning at breakfast. Six owls soared in, bearing a long, surprisingly narrow parcel and a lone owl trailed behind them, bearing a letter. People *ooed* and *aahed* as the owls landed at the Slytherin Table, just in front of Rose.

Rose untied the letter first and Neville and Malfoy both snatched the large parcel and argued over it.

*Rosalie,*

*I don't think it'd be a good idea to open this in the Great Hall – and yes, it's what you suspect it is. You can send us a letter as soon as you're done worshipping it – and I suspect that it'll be a long time in coming.*

*Always with Love,*

*Daddy*

"C'mon," she muttered, picking up the broomstick-parcel gingerly and heading out of the Great Hall. Neville and Malfoy followed her, loudly wondering what model it was. Smith's dark eyes followed her from the Gryffindor Table, his face narrowed dangerously.

As soon as they were out of the Hall, Malfoy pounced on the parcel and began ripping it apart viciously. Neville winced at the noise.

"Dear Merlin," Malfoy whispered reverentially when he'd finished and he held the new broomstick. "It's not..."

"It isn't..." Neville half-whispered.

"It can't be..." Malfoy murmured.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand?" a voice snapped from the archway. "Once you've finished gawking like trolls over it, you might remember the fact that first-years aren't allowed broomsticks." Smith stood at the threshold in all his golden, sneering glory.

“Not normal first-years,” Rose answered, taking the broomstick from Malfoy and waving it ostentatiously in Smith’s face. “Just special people.” Her words had the effect that she’d wanted to produce. The sneer on Smith’s face was replaced by an ugly leer.

“I suppose you think you’re special,” he said coldly, stepping up to her. He was about an inch taller than her – something that surprised Rose. Most boys were shorter than her, Neville stood nearly three inches shorter than her, Ron and Malfoy an inch – Mum said it’d change after they’d hit puberty of course.

“Of course, I do,” Rose answered brightly. “It’s not many first-years that are made Seekers for their Houses.” She ran a finger down the tail of the broom. “The first in over a hundred years, you know.”

The expression on Smith’s face did not change but suddenly his voice was lower, as if he didn’t want anyone else to catch his words. “I suppose you had to whore your way onto the Team – tell me, girly, how many times have you done Flint?”

“What?” Rose asked, puzzled. She knew the sentence was supposed to be insulting but she didn’t know what it meant. She’d never heard the word ‘whore’ before, and what did it mean, his saying that she’d ‘done’ Flint?

Malfoy and Neville both looked equally clueless.

“Oh, how charming,” Smith chuckled. “What charming innocence! How quaint!”

Rose knew the meaning of quaint at least, and it wasn’t a word that she wanted associated with herself. “Take that back, Gryffin-Dork,” she snarled, tossing the broom to Neville and then curling up her fists.

“Or what?” he laughed outright.

She whipped out her wand and shoved it at his face. He drew his easily and pointed it at her throat.

“Feisty,” he smiled. “Tell you what, kid, since you so badly want it, what about a wizards’ duel, hmm? Say midnight tonight, the Trophy Room? It’s always unlocked.”

“I’ll be her second,” Neville said promptly, before Rose had even decided to accept the challenge.

“And I’ll be her third!” Malfoy piped up. Rose heart sank in terror – she didn’t need a third, or even a second. She wasn’t playing to die before she hit her thirteenth birthday, thank you very much.

“I don’t need a third or a second, I could take all three of you easily myself,” he smirked. “But where’s the proof that you’ll ever show up? After all, you know what they say about Slytherins...”

“I pledge it on my honor,” Malfoy snarled. “A Malfoy’s honor.”

Something flickered deep in Smith’s dark eyes. “And of course, there’s the Black honor too, you’ve inherited from your precious mother...”

“That too,” Malfoy said. “And they’ll show up too, on my honor. Or else, I’ll take you on my own. I could, you know.”

“No,” Smith said frankly. “I don’t. You couldn’t take on *her* if you tried.” He leered at Rose.

“Good to know you have confidence in my abilities,” Rose said lazily.

Smith ignored her. “Tonight then. Midnight. Trophy Room. Be there.” He turned around and strolled into the Great Hall.

“What does the word ‘whore’ mean?” Rose demanded, whirling around to face Neville and Malfoy. They shrugged.

“Well, all we need is just a dictionary!” Rose said brightly. It couldn’t be that bad of a word could it? Or else Uncle Padfoot would have taught it to her.

**000**

They eventually did find out what the word meant – after combing through the H-Section (Malfoy thought it was spelled ‘hore’) of the dictionary during History class, they turned to the W-Section.

*“A woman who engages in promiscuous sexual intercourse, usually for money; prostitute; harlot; strumpet,”* Neville read out and then stopped. “Oh,” he muttered, looking away from Rose. “Erm.”

Malfoy’s cheeks turned as pink as if someone had performed *Rosaceous* on him, and Rose’s jaw dropped a mile.

“Well, you know what this means,” she said finally, after she’d regained her voice. Neville and Malfoy looked at her uncomprehendingly. “War,” she hissed, beating her right fist lightly on her left palm. “Battle to the death. Mortal Combat. *Armageddon*.”

“Armageddon?” Neville asked, obviously bewildered.

“Never mind,” Rose sighed, not wanting to admit that she didn’t understand the word herself – it was just another one of the words that she’d borrowed from Uncle Padfoot. “Tonight, Smith meets his nemesis. *Moi*.”

“Your accent is all wrong,” Malfoy observed. “You don’t pronounce it *moi* but...”

**000**

The little silver clock in the girls’ dormitory chimed eleven. Rose wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans and tucked the Marauders’ Map inside a pocket. Her legs felt like jelly as she crept out of the dormitory, heart thudding so fast that she was sure that one of the girls would wake up and see her and ask questions that she wasn’t ready to answer, which would lead to a fiasco, which would...

She tried to breathe in and out slowly – something Uncle Moony had told her was infallible in times of panic – and tiptoed down to the Common Room. The flames danced low in the hearth. A few of the torches on the walls had burned out. She slid into an armchair, hugging her knees, and biting her lip. She was terribly nervous.

Presently, Neville and Malfoy stole down, similar expressions of anticipation and anxiety plastered on their faces.

“Alright?” Neville whispered, tapping her lightly. Rose nodded numbly, her mouth sticky.

“C’mon,” Malfoy muttered, stalking out. Neville gave her a weak grin and sped off after him. Rose drew out the Marauders’ Map and clutched it tightly in her moist palms, trailing behind the two boys. Malfoy seemed to know the way; he navigated through the dark, empty corridors striped with bars of moonlight from the high windows and narrow, lightless stairways without even the slightest trace of hesitation in his face or bearing. Rose had to admire that; she could barely make out where they were in the dark.

“Well, we’re here,” Malfoy announced, stepping into the Trophy Room. It was a large room, roughly the size of a normal corridor – though broader – and filled with cupboards, cubbyholes, cabinets and chests stacked with trophies, shields, medals, plaques, cups...the crystal trophy-cases glimmered where the moonlight caught them and everything winked silver and gold in the darkness.

“*Lumos*,” Neville murmured and silvery light blossomed from the end of his wand. Malfoy and Rose followed suit, and then they both began to examine the room.

“Don’t you think we ought to stay close together?” Neville asked uncertainly, staying where he was. “Just in case he jumps us?”

“He’s a Gryffindor,” Malfoy told him. “He prides himself on his *chivalry* – of course, he won’t jump us. Or at least he won’t jump her.”

Rose glared at him and peered closely at a dainty golden shield. “*To Tom Riddle*,” she read out. “*For services of a meritorious nature, well-deserved, to the school.* Wonder what that was...”

“*To James Potter. Chaser, Gryffindor.* That’s your dad, Rose,” Neville said.

"To *Bellatrix Black. Outstanding Performance, O.W.L, N.E.W.T., Chaser, Slytherin,*" a cold voice whispered. "Isn't that your auntie, young Malfoy?"

Rose turned around and watched Smith stride in, his face hard, his eyes dark as the night. "Ready, Lolita?" he asked her, stopping a few feet from her.

"Anytime you are, Rhett," she said, maneuvering into a better position. Neville and Malfoy settled a few feet behind her, wands lighting up the scene. She was pleased to see a look of confusion flit over his face – apparently he'd never had *Gone with the Wind* read out to him by his mother.

"We bow you know," he said, bending his neck towards the floor. "Impractical protocol – incidentally, it was first mentioned in a treatise on dueling written by Salazar Slytherin."

Rose inclined her head towards the floor, watching him carefully. If her heart had been pounding before, it was thundering now.

"On the count of three, then," he whispered, pointing his wand towards her, dark eyes gleaming madly. "One."

"Two," she murmured, breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Three," he whispered, face alight with an emotion that she could not place.

"Start," Malfoy finished lamely.

Instinctively, Rose ducked out of the way before Smith had even opened his mouth. His hex – whatever it was – missed her.

"*Inflatus!*" she roared from the floor where she'd fallen, using her best curse. There was a blast like a gunshot and Smith stumbled and fell, disappearing behind a curtain of smoke. "*Inflatus!*" she screamed, stumbling to her feet and galloping towards him. "*Inflatus, Inflatus!*" she screamed again and again and the large room reverberated with the din, half-buried with light and smoke.

Then, there was a crash and her heart nearly stopped in terror as she heard the voice of Argus Filch, the caretaker, screaming and a cat – probably Mrs. Norris – meowing maliciously. Someone grabbed her arm and she grabbed someone's arms and there were more screams as they all began to run as fast as they could, they had no idea where. Her right arm was nearly wrenched out of its socket by the person gripping it. She stumbled and almost tripped but kept on running, heart crashing painfully through her chest, mouth dry and wet at the same time, skin clammy...

They ripped through tapestries, hurtled along secret passageways, clanging through halls full of suits of armor, and finally tumbled into a hallway close to the Charms classroom – miles from the Trophy Room. But they could still hear the cat meowing softly behind them and Rose sensed that they weren't safe, not yet, at least. Without prelude, she grasped the arm of the nearest person and ran for her life, right to the end of the corridor, and slammed into a locked door.

*"Alohomora!"* Smith snarled viciously – he was the one holding her arm – and she literally fell into a room with Neville clinging to her other arm and Malfoy to her waist. Panting, she closed her eyes and buried her face in the lower part of Smith's jeans, too exhausted to get up from her position on the cold floor. She felt Neville sink down besides her, breathing as hard as her.

She heard Filch's voice, louder and louder – they'd have to stun him or something if he came in, though she didn't know how to stun someone and she didn't particularly want to, maybe Smith could do it, he already had a taste for violence...and then it died away and she heard his awful cat pad away, meowing in discontent.

"We're alright," she mumbled, her eyes still shut.

"Get up," Smith said softly. "Get up and tell me we're alright again." There was something very odd in his voice. She slid an eye open and her heart nearly skipped a beat, her breath chilling in her body. In front of her was a living, magnified rendition of Cerberus, Gatekeeper of the Underworld. She looked up into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog, which filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads, three rolling pairs of mad eyes, three twitching nose



quivering in their direction, three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

The enormous dog, whose three heads all touched the high ceiling and whose paws shielded a portion of the floor, lighter in color than the rest of the floorboards, peered at them all curiously with its six eyes. Then it growled softly.

Smith used the worst word she knew, a word even Uncle Padfoot had told her she wasn't to use unless under extreme provocation. Malfoy wrenched open the door and bodily hauled them all out of the room – seizing Neville around the neck, Rose around the waist, and wrapping a leg around Smith's – just before the dog tore them open. They heard it roaring loud enough to wake up the whole school as they frantically tried to press the door closed as it butted against it.

*“Colloportus, Colloportus, COLLOPORTUS!”* Smith shrieked and suddenly the door sealed itself. They could still hear the three-headed dog moaning behind the door. He leaned against the door, his eyes almost black against his chalk-white face, his mouth open. Malfoy had his eyes shut, head bowed towards the floor, and hands clasped together. He was murmuring soundlessly – Rose guessed that he was praying. She felt like praying too but the only thing she seemed to have enough energy to do was to slide down to the floor again, trying to still her senses and just forget everything.

Neville was the only one among them who seemed to have brought back his normalcy back from the corridor intact – true he was breathing hard and his face was bathed in a thin film of sweat, but otherwise he was pretty normal. There was even a twisted, little smile on his face. It was the twisted smile that did it to Rose, her terror ebbed away, replaced by the rush of anger and outrage – *how dare he smile at a time like this?* Hot ire replaced the nonchalance of numbness. They all wanted to say something, Rose knew, but none of them dared.

Silence for a few long moments... then Neville broke it quietly. “That was the third floor corridor.”

*“And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death.”*

The third floor corridor. The forbidden one. The one the Headmaster told them not to go near in his Welcoming Speech during the feast before term started.

“Well,” Malfoy said lightly. “At least we know why it’s forbidden now.”

“I never wanted to find out,” Neville said acidly, smile fading. “We could all have died.”

Smith was panting heavily, but he managed to croak out, “Better one crowded hour of glorious life than...”

“A long one followed by an obscure death,” Malfoy finished. “If you could call that glorious. Personally, I don’t fancy being mauled to death by a big dog. It doesn’t make for the greatest epitaphs.”

Smith snorted and Neville sniggered. They weren’t scared anymore, they were excited once again and that made Rose angrier than ever – what right had they to be excited, now, of all times? Fools, the lot of them! Hadn’t they *seen* what she’d seen?

“It was standing on a trapdoor,” Rose said quietly, trying to remember the details. “It was...guarding something.”

Smith blinked at her and even Malfoy raised his eyebrows skeptically.

“It was,” Rose insisted, crossing her arms over her flat chest, temper flaring. “It was, I tell you, you people didn’t even notice anything...”  
*Boys, stupid boys, boys are always stupid...*

“We noticed the dog a whole lot earlier than you, Missy,” Smith informed her. “Or perhaps being locked up with an enormous three-headed dog is your idea of alright. If it is, I could arrange for a little tête-à-tête with you and Cerberus there.” He waved his wand threateningly.

Rose drew her own wand quickly, eyes flashing dangerously. *This is no time for jokes, boy. Don't you get it? Don't you get it?*

"What time is it?" Neville asked the group at random, employing his usual tact in solving problems. He'd sensed Rose's anger already, and he knew enough to know that an angry Rose was not a pleasant Rose.

"Twelve-nineteen," Malfoy said quickly, checking his magnificent pure-gold watch set with emeralds and engraved with a Latin inscription. *Flaunting your watch like that, disgusting really...*

"We'd best get to bed, then," Neville said, grabbing Rose's arm before she could open her mouth and start screaming – screaming for what she herself did not know. "Good night, Smith."

Smith nodded and strode off. Neville sighed and dragged Rose and Malfoy towards the Slytherin Dungeons.

"Don't look at me like that," he told her sharply as she flounced towards the staircase to the girls' dormitories. "If I'd let you argue with him there you'd have started another midnight duel with him."

"And Merlin knows they're nothing but trouble," Malfoy smiled. "Cheer up, Neville – at least we found out why the corridor's forbidden."

"I could care less about *that*," Neville said sharply. "It's nothing to be excited about. We could all have been killed, I repeat."

"And, sweet Morgana knows, we can hardly spare our precious Boy-who-Lived," Rose snarled, surprising herself with her viciousness. She was pleased – she didn't know why – to see the hurt expression on Neville's face as he dragged Malfoy up the staircase to the boys' dormitories.

**000**

Rose tossed around restlessly in bed after she'd reached the girls' dormitories, until Millicent had woken up and told her in not-so-polite but most certain words to go to sleep or face the consequences. She'd stopped crinkling the silk sheets for the pleasure of listening to

the sound and giving herself something to do, but she hadn't fallen asleep. She'd heard the ornamental, little, silver clock chime one before she'd drifted off into a troubled, dreamless doze.

The sound of the clock chiming six woke her up and she practically jumped out of bed. Half-formed ideas and images whirled madly in her mind as she wrestled into her uniform. Her body was on edge, even after barely five hours of sleep, and she knew that she couldn't go back to sleep. She was just about to slide out of the dormitory when a cool voice said out loud, "Where were you last night?"

She turned around cautiously and saw Pansy leaning on her elbow in bed, black eyes snapping fire and her pug-like face set hard and angry.

"Here," she said warily, although she knew it was no use. She wondered how Pansy had discovered about the Midnight Duel – which had turned out to be more of a Midnight Race away from Filch, which had nearly culminated in brutal death.

"Do you think I'm that stupid?" Pansy hissed, looking angrier than ever. "That I'm a fool like I lead Draco and the boys to believe?"

"Sometimes," Rose said, heading towards the door.

"If you take one more step towards the door, I swear to Circe, I'll tell Filch everything," Pansy snarled. She fumbled for her wand and pointed it at Rose. "Come here."

Rose approached her warily, fingering her own wand. Gingerly, she sat down on the edge of Pansy's bed. *Appearances can be deceiving, I s'pose...*

"I woke up just after midnight and I saw your bed was empty," Pansy said quietly. "Light sleeper. I wondered where you were. And then...well, you and Smith weren't very subtle about the duel thing were you?" She smirked humorlessly. "Tracey heard you two hollering out in the hall and she'd told me...naturally she never thought you'd be *that* stupid – but, of course, she was mistaken...And I put two and two together and I was going to wait up for you to give

you a piece of my mind –,” her eyes flashed angrily, –“but I must have fallen asleep...”

“Your point?” Rose asked, affecting a yawn. She clutched her wand tightly.

“Draco.” Pansy said quietly. “I don’t care what happens to you or your precious little Chosen One – by the way, he’s a prat – but, get this straight, dearie: *Draco is not yours to toy with.*”

“So, he’s yours?” Rose snapped. “You’re eleven. He’s eleven. Don’t you think this is kinda early for marriage?”

“I’ll be twelve in December,” Pansy said sullenly. “And I’m going to get married to him once he turns seventeen – that’s after me.”

“Six years,” Rose said patiently. “Besides, I have no interest in him, whatsoever. Oh my God, why are we even having this dumb talk?”

“Oh my God, why are *you* so dumb?” Pansy mimicked Rose’s tone. “This isn’t about me marrying him or your flirting with him – you do an excellent imitation of that, by the way – it’s about not risking his life in any of your pathetic, little spates with those filthy Gryffindors! *Duels are dangerous, they’re fatal!*” For a moment her face was transformed by fear. She gripped the neck of Rose’s shirt tightly, her black eyes huge and terrified in her pale face. “My father was killed in one, Daphne’s father was killed in one, and Theodore’s mother was killed in one! Do you have any idea of the risk involved?”

“We’re first years,” Rose wailed, trying to pry Pansy’s nails off – they were digging into her throat – “There’s no way we could kill...”

“But you won’t be first years always, will you?” Pansy hissed. “And you’ll grow up and learn to kill and you’ll still be fighting each other – Mother told me that’s how blood feuds, vendettas start – and Draco’ll be killed in the crossfire!”

*Note to self: Must check up the word crossfire. Also note to self, must ask Uncle Padfoot how blood feuds and vendettas start.*

"I promise I won't let the love of your life be killed in the crossfire," Rose said fervently and Pansy's grip relaxed immediately.

"Promise?" Pansy whispered.

"Dear God, no!" Rose cried and toppled out of the dormitory. *Note to self, Pansy is mad, mad, mad. Do not cross her.*

**000**

The Common Room was empty except for a pair of sixth-years entangled in a passionate snog-fest, in a settee by the fire, and a first-year, slouching in an armchair, watching them eagerly.

"Hey," Blaise greeted her when she perched on the arm of his chair. "Move a bit to the left, you're obstructing my view."

"You're sick," Rose observed, watching the couple wrestle and moan. "*They're* sick."

"No," Blaise corrected her. "They're sixteen. When I'm sixteen, all the girls will be queuing up to snog me."

"Not me," Rose said quickly. The couple stopped wrestling and picked themselves off the couch. They went out of the Common Room. Now Rose and Blaise were alone in the Common Room.

"You're hardly a girl," Blaise reminded her. "What kind of girl plays on a Quidditch team?"

"What about the Holyhead Harpies?" Rose demanded. "You've heard of them, haven't you?"

"Trash," Blaise said dismissively, waving an airy swarthy hand. "Fit merely for the brothels from which they sprang. Not, of course, that you belong in a brothel," he said quickly, gazing up at her as if he expected her to slap him. Rose shrugged noncommittally. *Note to self, find out what a brothel is.*

"Which girl would you like to snog?" Rose demanded, with interest. "I promise I won't tell."

"One day," Blaise said dreamily. "I'll compile a list of the ten most snoggable girls at Hogwarts. Naturally, Tracey would be at the top."

"She has pretty hair," Rose admitted.

"Cho Chang is pretty cute too," Blaise said. "Pity, she's a Mudblood."

"Excuse me?" Rose demanded, nearly falling off the armrest. "What did you just say?"

"She's pretty cute even though she's a Mudblood – the Chang girl in Ravenclaw, second year," Blaise repeated, looking up at her with bemusement.

"*Mudblood?*" Rose snarled, getting up. "Say that word one more time and I'll..." She spluttered for something terrible enough to say.

*"He'll be wearing his ribcage as a hat if he ever dares meddle with me again," Malfoy growled, not dissuaded in the least from the topic of the day – bloodthirsty plans for the demise of Smith. "I'll wrap his intestines around the Whomping Willow and feed his tiny, tiny brain to starving Hippogriffs and..."*

"You'll be wearing your ribcage as a hat. I'll wrap your intestines around the Whomping Willow and feed your brain to starving Hippogriffs," she said. Blaise raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"Are you sick?" he asked mildly, looking somewhat concerned for her sanity.

"*You* are," Rose said indignantly. "How you have the nerve to say that – you're *disgusting!*"

"You're mad," Blaise announced serenely and rose. "If I were you I'd visit Madam Pomfrey and ask for a cure for Babbling Potion – you seem to have swallowed some by mistake." He swept out of the Common Room, leaving Rose fuming. The prejudiced, bigoted, big-headed boy, did he think he could get away with something so disgusting just because he was good-looking? It wasn't to be borne and she, of all people, would most certainly not bear it. She'd duel

him, she would, if he used the word again and then he'd see what came of using the word, the dirty, nasty boy...

000

Rose hated Transfiguration and loved Defense against the Dark Arts. Neville hated Defense against the Dark Arts and loved Herbology. Malfoy hated Herbology and loved Transfiguration.

But on the matter of Potions, they were, all of them, neutral. Snape never said anything to Rose after her first lesson, nothing good and nothing bad. He spent most of the class avoiding her eyes, it seemed. He mostly ignored Neville too and only lingered at the table all three of them shared to bestow an approving nod in Malfoy's direction every once in a while. He targeted Smith more often than not – a fact with which Rose, who disliked the boy, was quite comfortable on normal days.

But today was not a normal day and today Rose's temper was at breaking point by the last lesson of the day – Potions. *Why is Snape always so nasty to Smith? It's not fair, it's barbaric and biased – just as nasty as the way Bl- no, I'm going to call him Zabini now, was so casual with the word Mudblood. Just like the way he tossed it out without even thinking about it – that's what's sick – like he didn't even think about using it, even though it's so horrible, that's how Snape treats Smith and none of us stick up for him...*

Rose felt vaguely that she ought to stick up for Smith but she didn't like him enough for that. A part of her was glad when Snape insulted him and took points from Gryffindor without provocation. Today, this part of her appalled her.

"What's on your mind?" Malfoy wanted to know when Neville, with a groan, restrained her from pouring the wrong ingredients into the potion for the third time in as many minutes.

"Stuff," Rose said evasively, watching Snape stroll up to Smith.

"The dog?" Malfoy asked in a low voice. He glanced around furtively as he said it.



“Oh, yeah, about that,” Neville said, his voice cold. “Well, Draco and I decided something about it. We forget to tell you.”

“You’re going to take on the Cerberus single-handedly to prove that you really are the Chosen One?” Rose demanded acidly. “That sounds magnificent, Neville. Send me a letter after you’ve done it – if you’re not too busy handling fan-mail of course.”

“Don’t worry – we’ll send it to you,” Malfoy assured her, smirking.

“Shut up,” Neville snapped as Snape prowled near them. “No, the thing is we’re going to ignore what we saw, and pretend it never happened.”

“Why?” Rose demanded, affronted.

Neville jerked his head impatiently, as if she were stupid. “Because I know, I just know, one of us is going to be thinking about why it’s there and that’ll lead to things we don’t need to bother about...”

“But we’ll begin to bother about those questions,” Malfoy supplied. “And, eventually, get ourselves killed while trying to figure out the mystery. Neville doesn’t feel like dying, and I confess, neither do I. What about you?”

“I’d rather die early than live my life cowering in fear,” Rose said. “Which is what you want to do...”

“Yep,” Neville said easily. “I have a highly developed instinct for survival. You do not.”

“So you have to look out for me,” Rose finished.

“That’s the gist of it,” Neville said serenely. “Forget everything, Rose, it won’t do anyone good poking around things we shouldn’t.”

“One word, Neville,” she hissed, bending over her cauldron. He bent to catch the word that she hurled at him, “*Coward.*”

**000**

Quidditch was fun and hard at the same time and two good, solid hours of practice helped take Rose's mind off the three-headed dog, disgusting Zabini, pathetic Neville, and mad, mad, mad Pansy. Flint was stern and loud and the players – particularly the Beaters, Montague and Warrington – were very aggressive, but they were rather nice to her. They all patted her on the head and called her a good kid after seeing her play the first time, till Rose began to feel much, much younger than eleven. Of course, it didn't help that most of them towered over her by nearly half-a-foot, or that her figure seemed to be even more insubstantial and delicate than their *shadows*.

"You're the best Seeker we've had in years," Flint grunted jubilantly as she swept down onto the ground, laughing, and brushing her short, black bangs out of her eyes. "Isn't she, boys?"

Rose had a hazy idea that he considered himself her adopted big brother and had taken the role of simultaneously protecting, encouraging, and smoothening her way. It could either be chivalry or the natural caring instinct aroused in any normal human being on the sight of a Puffskein, or a tiny first-year. Rose resented the idea of being considered a Puffskein by Flint, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it.

She trailed behind Flint and Urquhart. As they passed the Gryffindor Table, she saw a burly fifth-year next to Smith eye her malevolently. Smith winked at her and she couldn't help but grin – they were both thinking of the three-headed dog.

"Yeah, that's Wood," Flint said abruptly, turning around to look down into her face. "Captain of the Gryffindor Team, Keeper. Keep an eye out for him, he's trouble."

"So're you," Rose reminded him. "To the Gryffindors."

"So I am," Flint chuckled, patting her hair approvingly. "So I am." The older boys settled down at the Slytherin Table for dinner, but Rose, who'd already eaten, trudged down to the dungeons. The Slytherin Common Room was full of the usual entwined couples, people feverishly finishing their homework, and little groups clustered together chatting and playing Wizards' Chess and Gobstones.

Malfoy was tucked up in a moss-green velvet armchair embroidered with leafy, silver designs by a window, watching Crabbe and Goyle play Gobstones with a condescending look on his pale, pointed face.

"Neville's at the library," he said as soon as he saw her. "Go somewhere else, boys." His two thugs obediently lumbered 'somewhere else' with never a word. Rose had no choice but to fall into the vacated couch, arms crossed tightly over her flat chest.

Malfoy looked around furtively for a moment, and then leaned closer to her. In response, Rose leaned deeper into her couch.

"It was all Neville's decision, to forget about the dog," he said quickly, his voice low. He glanced around nervously as if afraid of being overheard.

"And I care because –"

"It was a cool dog," Malfoy said earnestly. "And, well, I was thinking about what you said last night and, well, I sort of, I mean, it kind of came to me because you'd, well you know, and I..."

"Spit it out," Rose said roughly.

Malfoy took a deep breath. "You said the dog was standing on a trapdoor. So I thought...why a trapdoor?"

It was a valid question. Rose eyed him with more interest.

*"A hinged or sliding door in a floor, roof, or ceiling. Usually an entrance into a secret passageway,"* Malfoy recited. "I looked it up at dawn – I was having a dream about the dog and I kind of woke up and started thinking and one thing led to another –"

"So you do have a personality," Rose said admiringly. "I thought you were just Neville's yesman and a spoilt rich-brat with inherited bodyguards."

"Yes, that too," Malfoy said agreeably. "But do you realize what it means?" His dull grey eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm, his whole pale, pointed, ferrety face alive with excitement.

“We seem to have stumbled onto a mystery,” Rose said quietly. “Wait a minute, I’ll get a quill and some parchment, and then we can solve it.” She’d meant to be sarcastic – the morning’s frustration and last night’s sudden bout of rage still lingered – but Malfoy seemed to take her seriously.

“It’ll be awesome!” he said jubilantly, with more excitement than Rose had ever seen him display. Rose considered it a plus point in his favor and – just because she’d done all her homework, wanted to avoid Neville, and was bored – she jumped up and ran to get her quill and parchment.

## **Halloween**

*"Every light casts a shadow. Some men choose to stand in the light; others, in the darkness. Be ye always aware that where you stand is a matter of choice, and let not the shadow creep over you unawares."*

*The Secret Book of Cadwallon the Druid*

**Reasons Three-Headed-Dog (aka Fluffy) MIGHT be stationed at Hogwarts:**

*Dumbledore's fond of keeping illegal pets(Side Note from Draco: That thing is most definitely illegal. **Side Note from Rose: How do you know? Didn't Hercules fight a three-headed dog?** Side Note from Draco: Just because there are historical precedents doesn't mean that it's authorized. **Side Note from Rose: You made that up.**)*

*It's there to guard something. (**Side Note from Rose: Duh. It was standing on a trapdoor.** Side Note from Draco: The easiest explanation is usually the one that doesn't work.)*

*Durmstrang has giant mutant alligators underneath its sewers and breeds Ukranian Ironbellies. Beauxbatons keeps Graphorns. Why shouldn't Hogwarts have dear, old Cerberus on hand as an accessory too? (**Side Note from Rose: Hogwarts doesn't need another accessory – it already has Acromantula, Threstrals...** Side Note from Draco: WHAT?! **Side Note from Rose: Chill, it could just be a rumor, though Uncle Padfoot keeps on telling me stories about how he battled them when he was in school)***

*Underneath the paws of Cerberus, within the heart of this giant castle, a prisoner is being held captive, against his/her will by the evil Dumbledore. (**Side Note from Rose: The person's name would have been listed in the Marauders' Map, silly! So, the thing that's hidden cannot be alive.** Side Note from Draco: Maybe they've put Unplottable Charms or something on the person so s/he doesn't show up on any map?)*

**In case of Number 2 or Number 4:**

**Things that might be hidden:**

***Something really expensive.***

***Something really dangerous.***

*Something really expensive and dangerous.*

***People that might be hidden:***

***You-Know-Who.*** (Side Note from Draco: A lovely theory except for one little flaw – he is DEAD, courtesy Neville. **Side Note from Rose: Daddy and Mum don't think so.** Side Note from Draco: My mother and father KNOW so.)

***Someone who's really powerful.*** (Side Note from Rose: ***If he's really powerful, he ought to be able to defeat Cerberus. If he's not that powerful, he doesn't need to be hidden under Cerberus.*** Note from Draco: Then I bet there are more enchantments, after Cerberus, to keep the person in. I'm brilliant, aren't I? **Side Note from Rose: Nothing could be further from reality.**)

They'd discovered the name of the three-headed dog from the Marauders' Map – which Rose had displayed to the amazed and intrigued Draco. It was Fluffy, but they both preferred to call it Cerberus, which sounded more fitting. As Draco had aptly put it, "only a bloke like that Hagrid would be queer enough to name that thing *Fluffy*." It had taken them the better part of a month to prepare the list. The process taxed both their intellects – to her surprise, Rose discovered that Draco had an IQ level nearly equal to hers (though, she was sure that his intelligence quotient could never match her own) – and cunning too, to compose it without Neville finding out.

So, while Neville attended Quirrell's tea-parties and wrote to his grandmother, Rose and Draco would sit together and think and argue and write. Rose was pretty sure that he suspected something, but apart from occasional threats that he would report the one-night stand with Cerberus if they waxed too enthusiastic about it, he kept his doubts to himself.

September and October blazed past in a flurry of new spells, ridiculous letters from Uncle Padfoot, bitterly-cold Quidditch sessions, fantasizing about Cerberus, and crackly, coppery-gold leaves floating

down to settle gracefully on the pale grass. And before Rose knew it, October 31st dawned cold and drizzly and Tracey was jumping on her bed screaming, "It's Halloween! It's Halloween!"

"Do shut up," Pansy said, her voice polished and ladylike. She was sitting cross-legged on her bed, examining her mirror-smooth, long nails newly painted orange-and-green in honor of the day. "It comes by every year."

"But it's my *birthday*!" Tracey whined as Rose yawned and pushed her off the bed. "You haven't forgotten, have you, Pansy?" There was a hurt look in her wide, warm blue-green eyes.

"Of course not," Pansy said, though Rose noted that there was a slight flush on her usually porcelain-pale cheeks. "How absurd you are!"

Tracey still looked a little hurt so Rose belatedly said, "Happy birthday!" and squeezed her. Tracey brightened instantly and began talking about what she was going to get, a new bottle of cotton-candy pink nail-polish, one of her grandmother's antique, silver hairbrushes, new robes, a dear, little silver pendant, and...

*I do not like girls*, Rose decided firmly, trying not to yawn as Tracey launched on about how pretty she would look in pale green silk. *Boys are far more sensible*.

**000**

"What," Draco demanded, "is the use of trying to haul up these feathers? It's not like it's going to be of any use later in our life."

"You never know," Neville said, concentrating on swishing-and-flicking his wand properly – Professor Flitwick had told him to repeat the movement before he started on his feather. "It might come in the exams."

"But what about after the exams?" Draco snapped, looking even more ferrety than usual. "We're not going to spend the rest of our lives lifting up feathers are we? At least, *I* am not."

“You’ll just leave it to your house-elves, won’t you?” Rose sniggered. “Yes, Ron, I’m trying to listen to you, but those twits just won’t shut up.”

Ron raised a reproachful flame-red brow. He was trying to show her the right way to perform the charm – he’d finished his task five minutes into the lesson and was now trying to help his partner, Rose. “Repeat the incantation,” he said, looking aggrieved.

“I’m sorry I’m so lousy at this,” she said mournfully, trying to look contrite and – judging by Ron’s expression – failing miserably. “Really. You should get Corner as a partner next time or maybe the bee-yoo-ti-full Padma...”

Ron’s ears turned red and he shot a half-glance at Padma Patil, who was concentrating on elevating her own feather.

“Spring is in the air,” Rose hummed, “Do you mean to tell me, Ronald Bilius Weasley, that you harbor a crush on the sweet and pretty and lovely Miss Patil? That you have finally decided to renounce your life of bachelorhood for the joys of matrimony with a pure and holy...”

“Oh shut up,” he said, his ears as red as his hair. “Repeat the incantation, please.”

“But it’s *boring*,” she insisted.

“And useless,” Draco piped up.

“And hurts my dignity,” Neville chanted.

“And looks silly,” Tracey giggled from in front of them.

“And tickles,” Millicent grunted from next to her.

“And doesn’t match my hairstyle at all,” Pansy said elegantly.

“And it doesn’t suit my new color-scheme,” Blaise smirked.

“And smells,” Michael Corner laughed from across him.



“And makes all sorts of disgusting noises,” Padma Patil called from next to him.

“And...” a Ravenclaw from behind her began but Professor Flitwick had already trotted over to them, looking disapproving. He waved his wand threateningly and assigned them all a foot of parchment on Levitating Charms, just as the bell rang and signaled the end of the day.

**000**

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceilings of the Great Hall, as the students entered in droves, while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins flicker.

“I love feasts,” Neville sang, looking down approvingly at the Halloween Banquet, every bit as splendid as the Opening-of-Term Feast.

“My stomach loves them,” Rose said, sinking down into a seat. “And so do my eyes and nose.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw bushy-haired Miss Granger enter the Hall with Ron, both of them laughing at something Michael Corner had just said. She nudged Neville who smiled wanly.

“Wonder what their children’s hair will look like,” he said, indicating Ron’s fiery-red tresses and Miss Granger’s bushy, brown curls.

“Nothing pleasant,” Draco said calmly, helping himself to a dish of odd-looking bread. “Pane di Noci,” he explained in answer to Rose’s startled look. “I had it when I was on vacation in northern Italy. It is to die for.”

“It *does* look fatal,” she observed. “I’d rather die than have one.” On cue, he glared at her and launched into a diatribe detailing the finer points of just why Pane di Noci was so very wonderful and how refined and sophisticated his taste was in contrast to hers. She ignored him while Neville listened patiently – but then Neville had infinite patience with idiots while she did not.

She looked down the length of the table and saw Blaise gazing dreamily at Padma Patil's twin, sitting at the Gryffindor Table. *They're really pretty, both of them, Padma and Parvati, every bit as pretty as Tracey*, Rose decided without envy, *They might even be good-looking enough for Uncle Padfoot to date for more than three hours, a couple of years from now*. Most of Uncle Padfoot's girlfriends tended to last a week-and-a-half on average. His longest girlfriend ever, he'd once confessed to her, had lasted nineteen days. Rose grinned, wondering what Mum would say if Uncle Padfoot ever told her that fact – probably launch into an aggressively feminist speech, no doubt.

She saw that the Granger girl had abandoned her place with the Gryffindors and was sitting next to Ron with the Ravensclaws. They were chatting animatedly. Rose observed with some disconcertment that it was the first time she'd ever seen Ron talking for so long and so naturally with a girl who was not twenty years older than him or ten years younger than him. Ron was very shy and generally uncomfortable with girls (Rose didn't count), even Padma Patil, even Tonks.

She shot a half-glance at the Hufflepuff Table where Tonks, (her real name was Nymphadora, but she said that she loathed the name) Uncle Padfoot's cousin, Andromeda's daughter, was sitting. Her hair was waist-length and Halloween-orange for the day. Rose was just wishing that she could be a Metamorphagus too, when the doors of the Great Hall clanged loudly open. Quirrell sprinted into the room, his turban askew and his face white with terror. Everyone stared as he reached the Headmaster's chair, slumped against the table and croaked, "Troll – dungeons – thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was an uproar. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of the Headmaster's wand to bring silence. "Prefects," he rumbled, "Lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

The prefects darted around the room, harrying younger students, shouting, pushing.

"Hustle," Flint called while passing by. He hauled her up. "You don't want to be around now."

“Mmm...” Rose mumbled, squinting around for Neville. She caught Draco around the arm and he turned to her, pale and sick-looking. “Where’s Neville?” she snarled.

“I don’t know, leave me alone!” he cried, trying to shake her off. “He’s probably with the prefects and, sweet Morgana, unhand me, woman!”

Rose felt sick inside. “He hasn’t,” she whispered. “He wouldn’t leave without making sure I was alright. He... oh dear *God!*”

Ducking underneath the surging crowd she joined the Gryffindors going the other way, barely hearing Draco scream behind her. “What the-” Smith began in bewilderment as she accidentally knocked into him, staring at her. “Potter—”

*The dungeons, the dungeons – not the towers!* She remembered and wove out of the crowd of Gryffindors. But she couldn’t join the Slytherins – they’d jostle her back into the dormitories and she was pretty sure that Neville wasn’t headed that way. No, not just pretty sure, *definitely* sure. She darted behind a suit of armor, crouching down, praying no one would see her.

“What the *hell* are you doing?” a harsh voice asked and she toppled backwards. She squinted up and met Smith’s indignant dark eyes.

“Are you *insane?*” another voice, equally harsh, demanded and Draco’s silvery eyes flew into her line of vision.

She ignored them and scrambled out from behind the suit of armor. The two boys trailed after her, bickering, but she couldn’t waste time explaining Neville and his motives to them, and oh, would they ever shut up? She flew down the steps to the first level of dungeons, the boys not able to match her pace. She was mad with terror, heart pounding crazily, stumbling and tripping over the hem of her robes but running for her life, for Neville’s life.

There were the stairs to the lower dungeons just in front of her, maybe she could reach him in time and, oh, she’d make him suffer for making her worry so, God in heaven she would... But what was that stench? It was horribly foul, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one ever cleaned.

A rough hand grabbed her around the waist and bodily slammed her into a wall. She sank to the floor and Draco and Smith crouched beside her. She was about to open her mouth and scream at them, those insolent idiots who couldn't understand, when Smith put a finger to his lips and pointed. And then, heart tossing in her chest, like a ship on a stormy sea, she heard it – a low grunting and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. At the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving towards the stairs leading to the lower dungeons. She shrank even deeper into the shadows, dragging Smith and Draco close to her.

It emerged into a patch of lamplight and her terror increased to fever pitch. She could feel Draco trembling and Smith silently mouthing prayers. It was a horrible sight, twelve feet tall, its skin a dull, granite grey, its great, lumpy body like a boulder with a small, bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat horny feet. The smell it emitted was incredible. It was holding a huge, wooden club, which dragged along the floor with a stomach-turning sound, because its arms were so long.

*A mountain troll.* For a moment, her mind darted back to the illustration-filled book Uncle Moony had sent her about magical creatures.

Smith waited until it had climbed down the steps before he mouthed to them, "It's going for one of the dungeons. We can lock it in."

Rose nodded and, edging close to the wall, she pattered as silently as she could down the stairs. She had her wand out and she clutched it tightly, so tightly that it started emitting little red-and-gold sparks. *I'm not brave enough for Gryffindor*, she thought even as she ran, *I'm too scared – no wonder the Hat didn't put me there.*

She reached the landing and waited in the shadows as the troll stood in the passage, looking stupendously ill at ease. She sensed Draco and Smith behind her but said nothing, kneeling silently down and not even feeling the pain of her knees against the hard, cold stone. Swiftly and quietly, still crouching near the wall – and for once, thankful that she was still only five feet tall and had a wee little shadow – she crept closer to the troll, her wand out. Draco crept and

Smith crawled behind her and she knew that their wands were out too. She felt a little better that they were with her, that if the worst came to the worst they'd all die together. *Not very nice of me, hoping that they'll die with me.*

As Smith had said, the troll finally had enough of looking stupid in the hallway and began to lumber towards one of the dungeons and stood stupidly in the doorway for a moment. Then it hobbled in. "*Colloportus*," Rose said under her breath, just as Smith had said on the night they'd met Cerberus, and pointed her wand at the door to the dungeon. It shut itself soundlessly.

"Yes!" Draco whooped, looking as pleased as if he had closed the door. Smith was actually smiling – not grinning, for once. Flushed with victory, Rose started to run back up the passage, but as soon as she reached the corner, she heard something that made her heart stop – a high, petrified shriek – and it was coming from the dungeon that she'd just locked up!

"Bloody hell," Smith said, white as a sheet. He dashed past her and screamed, "*Alohomora!*" and the door clicked open.

"*Lumos!*" Draco and Rose cried, darting to the doorway. The narrow beams of light from their wand-tips gave very little illumination, but there was no help for it. She saw Neville in front of the troll, his face sick and white, his wand raised. The troll blinked stupidly in the light and Neville took the opportunity to scream, "*Inflatus!*"

The curse could be effective if someone like Quirrell or Rose – who loved it – used it, but in the hands of Neville, it created little more than a temporary diversion.

"Get back here!" Rose screamed, lunging out of the range of Draco's grip and into the dungeon. The troll looked at her and suddenly it was heading for her. Smith used the worst swear-word Rose had ever heard and dove into the room.

"With me – *Inflatus!*" he screamed at the same time as Draco and Rose cried, "*Inflatus!*" pointing at the troll's club. It had some effect; the club flew out of the troll's massive paw and slammed into Neville's stomach. He stumbled and fell.

“Oh God,” Rose cried, trying to get to him. “Oh no, no, no...”

“*Inflatus!*” Draco and Smith cried at the same time, trying to distract the troll away from her and Neville. It produced the desired result, they were soon edging out of the dungeon, the troll following them, growling in rage now. Rose fell to her feet next to Neville and checked his pulse quickly – just like Daddy had told her to do in cases of emergency. He was alive – but he had fainted. Rose watched the troll lumber, and then begin running towards Draco and Smith. It struck her as being very funny but then, as it picked up speed and began growling and the boys screaming and flying before it, she changed her opinion of the matter. It was nothing short of horrifying, watching a fully-grown mountain troll chase two tiny boys – they looked very tiny next the troll.

She waited until they were all out of the dungeon before screaming, “*Colloportus!*”

Soundlessly, the door to the dungeon swung shut. She was left alone with Neville in the dark. They were both safe but Draco and Smith...? How could two eleven-year-olds who couldn't even outrun her, ever outrun a fully-grown mountain troll? But there was no help for it; they'd have to fend for themselves seeing as they were both still conscious. As for Neville...

“I hope your Gran sends you a week's worth of Howlers,” she told his prostrate form firmly.

**000**

“So the total is...” Rose asked, perching on Neville's bed in the infirmary.

“Five points for me, five points for you, five points for *him*, and five points away from him,” Draco recited, leaning back into his bed.

“Five points for Slytherin, five points for Gryffindor,” Smith said, wincing as Madam Pomfrey dabbed a smoking purple liquid on the cut on his head. Apparently, the troll had grabbed a candelabrum in the upper dungeons and thrown it at Smith's head while they were running away from him – hence the cut. Draco had fallen on his robes

when Smith had grabbed him in terror and split his lip. Later, he'd been kicked ten feet through the stone passage of the upper dungeons, by the angry troll – just after Smith had been hit by the candelabrum.

Thankfully, the teachers arrived before they could come to any more harm, and rescued them – and later Rose and Neville locked in the dungeon – in a flurry of Stunning Spells, points awarded, and plenty of screams and lectures.

"I came off best," Rose announced. "I didn't get hurt."

"If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be hurt," Draco glowered at her.

"If it wasn't for *him*, none of this would have happened," she said, glowering down at Neville. "I sent a letter to your Gran," she told him sweetly. He winced in horror and croaked, "have some sympathy for me."

"I have none at all for vainglorious idiots," she stated. "You had me worried sick."

"What about us?" Draco demanded, looking injured. "We were the ones who nearly died!"

"Why did you go down in the first place?" Smith asked, looking thoughtfully at Neville. "Are you that dumb?"

"He is," Rose told him. "And you were even dumber to follow me – I feel guilty because of your frightful incompetence!"

"Oh, excuse my sense of chivalry," Smith said acidly. "If you went down alone neither of you would have lived to tell the tale! Frightful incompetence, my a..."

"Language, language!" Madam Pomfrey *tsked*, looking disapproving. She bustled out of the room, frowning at him.

"Thanks for rescuing me," Neville said, looking awkward. "I guess I'm just a stuck-up, conceited boy, who thinks that just because he..." Smith and Draco were leaning towards him, looking pleased, but

Rose sensed he was trying to worm his way out of the situation by pretending to be humble.

“Clam up,” she told him, swiping at his head. “You are stuck-up and conceited, yes, but that doesn’t excuse you from being the grandest prat of all time.”

“I won’t do that again,” he said, pretending to look remorseful.

“I’ve known you since you were five,” Rose reminded him. “Your tactics won’t work on me, Longbottom. So, you’d just better settle down because I have a beautiful, hour-long lecture planned for you and your prattishness.”



## ***Repercussions***

*"Society is thick, Normality is overrated, Lunacy is underestimated, and in the midst of it all, I remain relatively sane."*

*- Anonymous*

"...A DISGRACE TO THE MEMORY OF YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER!! WHAT WOULD THEY SAY IF THEY HEARD OF THIS?! WELL, MASTER LONGBOTTOM, THEY WOULD SAY NOTHING BECAUSE THEY WOULD DISOWN YOU STRAIGHT, WITHOUT ANY MORE WORDS!! THE IDEA, THE VERY IDEA AND THE PRESUMPTION!! AN ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD TAKE OUT A FULLY-GROWN MOUNTAIN TROLL?! ARE YOU A FOOL OR DID THAT PRETTY SCAR ON YOUR HEAD IMPAIR YOUR EGO PERMANENTLY?!"

IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR ROSE POTTER, I'D HAVE NEVER COME TO HEAR OF THE MATTER – I EXPECT YOU'D BE QUITE PLEASED TO LEAVE ME IN THE DARK, WOULDN'T YOU?! WELL, MY LORD, JUST YOU PUT ONE MORE TOE OUT OF LINE AND I'LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT BACK HOME, YOUR FORMER ACHIEVEMENTS FORSOOTH!!"

The red envelope dropped onto the Slytherin Table, burst into flame, and curled into ashes. Neville winced and muttered from underneath the table, "Well, it could have been worse."

"It couldn't," Draco said, looking very superior. "I love your grandmother; she's nearly as horrible as mine."

"You are an evil, twisted prat, who deserves to be burnt alive. I thought you were on my side," Neville said indignantly, climbing up onto his seat and looking nervously around. People from the other tables were sniggering and pointing at him. The older students looked at him with bewildered incredulity, – the idea of a little kid thinking he could take out a troll by himself! – and the younger ones with contempt and amusement – well, that's what came of being the Boy-Who-Lived! Quite full of himself wasn't he?

*Rose Iris Potter,*

*I am shocked and horrified at the enormity of your actions. You could have been killed – and not pleasantly, I might add! It was an atrocious, foolhardy thing to do and I doubt even your father or Sirius could have come up with the idea – well, no, I don't doubt it, but I expected better from you, more sensible, reasonable conduct!*

*Yes, I know you were trying to rescue Neville – if Augusta wasn't seeing to him with her Howler I'd give him a thorough lashing with my tongue! – but wouldn't the more levelheaded course of action have been to report the matter to one of the teachers? You wouldn't have wasted time – I know how fast you can run – and nobody would have gotten hurt.*

*Darling, don't take that in the wrong context. You were very brave, I admit, and unselfish to try to rescue him, and you did what you thought best, I suppose. But I'm your mother and, well, the thought of what would have happened if luck hadn't intervened – and yes, it was sheer luck that any of you made it out without being killed brutally – makes me shudder. Hogwarts is a hazard-prone zone at its best, full of danger and mysteries that should not be unraveled. At its worst, it can be fatal for the castle has a life of its own, and a very active sense of malice.*

*Yes, you might laugh at that, but, trust me on this, darling. As the years go by and you learn more of its secrets you will understand what I am trying to say. Your father had more brushes – and some of them were not only brushes – with death than I care to recount. He had excellent intentions and was – and still is – one of the most courageous men I've ever known. Of course, it's all very admirable and I'm proud to have a daughter so like the man I love – you really are your father's daughter, darling, in more than just looks. But that doesn't mean I want you to go through what he did.*

*Please, please, for my sake if not for your own, be careful. Try not to kill yourself more often than is required, never kill if you can help it, and lie yourself black in the face out of a potentially lethal situation. That isn't advice most mothers give to their daughters but that's the best I could manage, and most of it is drawn from my own experiences. Someday, when you're older (and yes, eleven is still*

*young), I'll tell you the story of my schooldays, just as I used to tell you stories about your father's schooldays when you were little.*

*Be safe,*

*Your Mother*

Rose re-read the letter again, wondering what Mum meant by the advice – *never kill if you can help it* – and Mum's words about drawing all this advice from her own experiences. An ominous chill crept over her as she wondered just what Mum was hiding from her, about her own schooldays, something that Rose needed to be older to hear about.

Had she, her pretty, laughing, bright-eyed Mum, ever killed before? She strained her memory, trying to think of what she knew of Mum's schooldays. She'd been a teenager during the First War against Voldemort, and maybe, she needed to kill someone to protect herself and maybe she'd been in 'potentially lethal' situations before and...

It was all too complicated for her to think out, and highly disconcerting. Even if Mum had needed to kill someone for her own protection, the idea was repulsive and frightening to Rose, even though she could see the logic to it. *But Mum can't be a murderer – she just can't! I know she can't because...because, well, I'd know if she was one!*

She swung her bag and got up, head aching slightly. She didn't have the energy to listen to Neville and Draco bicker about Neville's stupidity – she already knew Neville was stupid and that she'd probably break her neck someday trying to save his life!

*But he'd do the same for you,* a little voice within her whispered. *That's why he wants you to forget about Cerberus – he knows that you thrive on excitement and chasing danger and living on the edge, and whatever else Uncle Padfoot thrives on (Daddy did summarize it quite nicely). And he'd risk his neck for you, just like you have for him, and...*

*We know each other too well,* she suddenly realized as she stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. *Maybe it's because we were born a day apart, maybe because we've been friends since we were five, but*

*it's like we can't have any secrets from each other, like we're...too close for comfort, just like Uncle Padfoot would say! We rub off on each other like knives on knives and that's not good.*

She hated thinking out complicated things like that, it made her head hurt and she usually felt miserable afterwards. Neville and she were friends, *best* friends, and yet the verdict was that they weren't good for each other! Either that or her verdict was totally wrong – which was also a strong possibility, Rose thought cheerfully, because she was anything but a philosophizer. That was Neville's department.

"Oi! Potter!" a voice called and Smith was running towards her. He stopped next to her, looking slightly breathless.

"What?" she demanded, not in the mood for him and his antics.

"I forgot to tell you," he said, still huffing. "I think you're the craziest, most hare-brained, thick-skinned girl I've ever met."

"Buzz off," she snapped, hugging herself. "It was your own fault you followed me – I never asked you to, did I?"

"But," he continued, as if she hadn't interrupted. "I think you're the bravest, most unselfish girl I've ever met too."

"I still don't like you," she told him. "You're a foul-mouthed, arrogant, nasty poser and the greatest jerk of all time."

He grinned. "Same here, I still think you're raving insane. And one day, I'll be Gryffindor Seeker and beat you in every single game, see if I don't."

"Good luck with that," she said. He smirked and trotted back inside. *I retract whatever I might have said about boys being more sensible than girls, yesterday. When you consider specimens like Smith and Neville, it kinda puts into perspective how wonderful girls are!*

**000**

"Miss Potter, a word please."

It was the last class of the day, Potions. Rose stopped cramming her things into her bag and stared bewilderedly at Snape. Draco and half the class were blinking stupidly at her. Neville was frowning slightly, his forehead creased. It was no wonder, really, that they were all so shocked. So far, Snape had shown a thorough disinclination to converse with her, or even utter more than a few non-committal grunts to her.

He'd never praised her – aside from the first class – and never insulted her – as he was fond of doing to Smith. He'd never awarded her points – but then, he very rarely awarded points to *anyone* – and never taken away points. She might as well have been a part of the scenery for all the interest he took in her. And she hadn't done anything wrong during the lesson. It was a conundrum, as Uncle Padfoot was fond of saying. She didn't like conundrums.

"Yes sir," she muttered, going to his desk. Neville patted her sympathetically on the back before hurrying out – he was due for another tea-party with Quirrell.

Snape waited before the rest of the class had climbed out of the dungeon-classroom, throwing curious looks at her. He pointed his wand at the ceiling, mouthing a spell that started with *M*, then turned to look down at her.

"You foolish girl," he said roughly. "What were you thinking?"

He seemed to be waiting for an answer to his question, so she mumbled, "Nothing really, sir."

"It was sheer, dumb luck," he told her curtly, "that saved you from a very painful death that day. You were, I repeat, a fool to go through such a performance."

"Yes sir, I know, sir," she said dutifully.

"Remember," he told her, leaning down to look into her eyes. "That, in this world, there is no place for fools. You will be wiped out if you do not take more care."

"My mother sort of told me that," she said quietly, looking down. She missed the flicker in his eyes and the split-second during which his face transformed into something else.

"Very wise of her," Snape said calmly. "I hope, for your sake, that you take her advice."

"I'll try," she said, deciding to be truthful because the situation didn't appear to be 'potentially lethal'.

"Just like your father," he said, and his voice was cold. "Foolhardy to the end."

"Sorry sir," she said, though she didn't know what she was apologizing for.

"Be safe," he told her quietly, and waved his hand. She took it as a dismissal and scuttled to the door. It had been an odd day...

**000**

*Dear Rosalie,*

*You've already received Uncle Padfoot's letter and your Mum's, too. I don't think you need more encouragement – by the way, is there any other phrase save "You're brilliant, a chip off the old block!" and "I just know you'll win!" in Uncle Padfoot's letter? – or any more warnings to be careful – goodness knows, your Mum's inserted as many cautions as she can in her letter!*

*At first, I was unsure whether to send you a letter or just leave you to fret about your first Quidditch match in peace. But then, I thought it would be most un-paternal of me not to send you one. I still haven't got the hang of the father-thing, you see, even after eleven years and two children and a little one on the way. So, here's the letter, a letter I have no idea why I'm sending. I'll try to be brief, though it takes longer to compose a brief letter than a short one, goodness knows.*

*It doesn't matter whether you win or lose. I'll be proud of you for playing and I'll never stop loving you, no matter what you do. Of course, you know that – frankly, I'd be hurt and more than a little*

*insulted if you didn't – but I just wanted to tell you that again and also, I don't know really what else to say. I daresay I'll be better at this sort of thing when Harry's turn comes or the other baby's – I'm not nearly as smooth at this as your Mum or Uncle Padfoot. So, you'll just have to bear with your clumsy, young father, who still feels seventeen at heart. So, I suppose that's it, and goodbye for now.*

*With Love,*

*Daddy*

Gently, Rose folded Daddy's letter. Carefully, she smoothed the creases, and slipped it into her pocket. Then she threw back her head, until it hit the back of her green velvet armchair, and closed her eyes. Dramatically, she announced to the pre-match-fawning Slytherin first-years clustering around her, "I'm going to be sick."

There was an immediate uproar. "Not on me!" squeaked Zabini, sounding very much like a girl. He edged away from her as swiftly as elegance permitted.

"Disgusting!" Pansy sniffed, fumbling for something in her pockets. She thrust something spicy-smelling into Rose's face. "Here, take my smelling salts!"

Rose coughed, eyelids flying open and slapped the thing away. "I was joking!"

"That was a horrible joke!" Zabini roared from the other side of the room. "I could have been sick!"

"And the dear Lord knows we wouldn't want that," Tracey snapped at him. She put two cool, soft hands on either side of Rose's face and began stroking her cheeks lightly. "Do you want to –" she began, her voice gently as if she was talking to a convalescent.

"No, thanks," Rose muttered, pushing her off. "I'll be fine." There was a general sigh of relief. The first Quidditch match of the year, Slytherin versus Gryffindor, would be held the next morning. It was night and the whole of first-year had elected to sit up with Rose and offer her their encouragement and support, and try to keep her mind

off the match. The problem was that most of them had very funny ways of offering encouragement.

Nott was under the delusion that reciting all the injuries suffered by Seekers in professional tournaments – ranging from being mauled by Hippogriffs, transported to Iceland in the middle of a match in India (wearing light, airy Indian Quidditch-robcs), and being bitten by leprechauns (who bore a lethal poison with no known antidote in their teeth). Zabini kept on telling her she'd lose five pounds if she allowed herself to be whacked by Bludgers for a solid half-hour with no breaks in between. Millicent kept punching her on the back enthusiastically – she meant to be supportive, Rose was sure, but her back hurt and she didn't have the courage to tell her to bugger off.

Pansy said nothing, but there was a smile on her face that Rose didn't like. And Draco sat opposite her, legs crossed lady-like, an angelic expression on his face and his mouth primed up as if he was trying not to giggle. Neville was off for one of his soirees with Quirrell and Rose missed him, for the first time in her life. It was a funny thing, really, she and Neville had been inseparable for the last five years, they'd never had time or space to miss each other. They visited each other every day and some nights and he was always on hand when she wanted to complain or scream or play or fight or worry or laugh with.

Now, he wasn't, and it felt like there was something just *wrong* about the universe in general. She was lonely, despite of the chattering, back-slapping eleven-year-olds (and in Tracey's case, twelve-year-old) around her, and too tense, her nerves strung to fever-pitch, to even try to make an effort to calm down.

"I should go up now," she mumbled. "Early to bed and all." At once, the little knot around her loosened and Millicent, smiling sympathetically, began dragging her up. The girls followed her upstairs, Millicent slapping her on the back, Pansy murmuring something, Tracey's arm around her waist, and Daphne patting her hair. She quickly undressed and fell into bed and soon, worn out with the day's worrying, she slipped into a deep, dreamless slumber.



*Tick-tick, tick-tock, tick-tick...* She bolted upright, sweating. She'd been dreaming about dragons on Nimbus 2000s chasing her around the Quidditch pitch, blonde dragons with skulls on their foreheads and she'd be crying tears of blood and was that blood on her hands?! Oh no, just sweat, and it was only just four o'clock and a bitterly cold November morning, but she was sweating and, oh dear, she'd never be able to go to sleep again now but she really needed to sleep – her body didn't need it, but her mind insisted – but she'd be late then and the match was at nine and, oh, she was going to die, and Harry would get her room and...

*No matter what happens, Harry James Potter shall never inherit my room. This I swear, by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin,* she thought determinedly and climbed out of bed. She dressed as quickly as she could, though there was no need to hurry but her instinct urged her to, and ran down the staircase to the Common Room. There was a little fire warming the hearth and the room was clean once again, quiet and pristine and dismally green.

There was a small boy snoring in one of the armchairs by the fire, half-buried in green velvet cushions. His brown fringe could not hide the tell-tale lightning-bolt scar on his forehead, and amused and exasperated, she recognized Neville. His hand was stretched towards the floor, where a thick book rested on the carpet. Cautiously, she stepped towards him, the carpet muffling her footsteps, and gingerly picked up the book. *Dross and Gloss, Nicolas Flamel: Secrets Revealed* read the cover.

She tucked herself into the armchair opposite him, feeling it would be unkind to wake him at such an hour and began to read. An hour, two hours passed and she was a hundred-and-sixty pages into the book before he began to stir.

"Hey," he muttered thickly, eyes fluttering open. She looked up from the book and frowned severely.

"What's," he yawned heavily, "what's the time?"

She frowned again and raised six fingers.

“Oh,” he half-yawned, but quickly shut his mouth, looking slightly crestfallen. “You’re mad again, aren’t you?”

She didn’t spare him a glance.

“I’m sorry,” he protested, rubbing his eyes. “He kept me a long time – really! And then, I started reading that on the way here and I thought about sitting down in the Common Room a few minutes to finish the chapter and I just fell asleep!”

“Cad,” she hissed, “inebriated scoundrel.”

He looked at her bewilderedly. “I’m really, really sorry,” he said humbly. “I didn’t do anything bad or you know, dangerous.”

“Blasphemous hooligan,” she sniffed, turning the page. “You have my blessing to throw yourself off the Astronomy Tower.”

“So, you forgive me?” he said brightly.

She shot him a searing look, “Only when you brush your teeth. Your breath reeks.”

“And you won’t use this as blackmail – tell Gran, I mean?” he wheedled, looking like a sad puppy.

“Thanks for the idea,” she grinned, finishing Chapter Eleven and shutting the book with a snap. “I wouldn’t have been able to come up with it myself.”

He made a face and trudged up to his dormitory.

**000**

Rose rested her forehead against her arms, wrapped around her knees. Two-hundred pages of *Dross and Gloss*, being ‘encouraged’ down to the Great Hall by Slytherins and having taunts thrown at her by Gryffindors, who’d laughed themselves hoarse at the tiny Slytherin Seeker, a so-called breakfast, and climbing into a little, loose green-and-silver Quidditch robes – they’d all passed in a whirl of confused color and sound that barely registered, and it was hard to believe that

it was nearly ten. The butterflies inside her stomach began a spirited tap-dance, she was going to throw up her meager breakfast, she knew.

“All right?” Flint asked, coming out of his cubicle. His voice was kind and she nodded slightly, feeling desperately un-alright.

“Buck up,” Warrington grunted, reaching down to muss up her short hair. “You’ll feel better on the pitch.”

*I know that. There’s no way I can ever feel worse than I’m feeling now!*

“Ready, gentlemen? Lady?” Montague called and the changing room echoed with tense, nervous laughter. Even Rose managed a croak.

“It’s time,” Flint said quietly – or at least, quietly for him. He strode towards the door, all six feet eight inches of him held erect and proud, thick muscles rippling underneath his robe. *He’s definitely got some troll blood in him, that one – at least, if it’s not giant blood!*

Rose fell into step at the end of the line, clutching the Nimbus 2000 tightly, like a shield against the world. She bit her lip as she’d been doing unconsciously since breakfast – the skin was already torn at some places and dark and bruised at most other points. The pitch looked heavenly in the crisp November sunlight and the crowd, solid walls of either green-and-silver or red-and-gold screamed in excitement and the commentator’s voice picked up. Rose reveled in it for one dizzying moment, and then Madam Hooch was telling the captains to shake hands and she turned to quickly survey the Gryffindor Team.

A slender, dark boy with dreadlocked hair – Lee Jordan – was the Gryffindor Seeker. He sneered at her and wiggled his nose disdainfully. The Beaters, Kenneth Towler and Patricia Stimps, looked like pixies in comparison to Montague and Warrington. Flint and Wood glowered at each other, their fists white as they shook hands, each straining to break the other’s grip – or fingers.

“On the count of three – One...” Madam Hooch’s voice seemed to be an eternity away, but it pulled Rose back from her daydreams and,

suddenly, she couldn't suppress a giggle. She tossed her messy, short hair away from her face and smiled, almost sweetly, at Jordan. Really, did he think he stood a chance against her? It was really too funny.

000

"...And Slytherin wins the match, one-hundred-and-ninety points to Gryffindor's one-hundred-and-ten!" the commentator's voice called out and Rose spit out the Snitch. She clutched it tightly in her hand; wanting to rip the little wings off from the golden ball – it tasted *disgusting* – and screamed with euphoria. A half-second later the Slytherin Team had landed – or in, Flint's case, jumped off their brooms in mid-air – beside her. Flint pulled her up and threw her into the air and caught her, laughing with joy.

And then the crowd of Slytherins was surging towards her and Neville was squeezing her so tight she thought that she might faint. Ron managed to grab hold of her hand and kissed her cheek. Through the gaps in the bodies pressing around her, she caught sight of red-faced Wood stalking off the pitch and McGonagall frowning through her spectacles at the Slytherins.

The match had seemed tilted in Gryffindor's favor, – they really did have superb Chasers – who managed to score eleven goals against Slytherin's four. And Jordan *had* managed to spot the Snitch a half-second before Rose... But in a glorious, last-minute, highly controversial and truly delightful battle for the match involving uncaught cobbling and the unfair advantage a Nimbus 2000 gave one, on Rose's part, Slytherin had won. Rose had managed to lash out at Jordan with her elbows and they'd both fallen off their brooms – he, because of the excessive use of elbow involved and she, because she'd been riding too fast to control the broom only with her legs.

Then, Rose had managed to swallow the Snitch in midair, come crashing down to the ground with a few magnificent bruises, and then cough it out, saliva sticking to it. It had been brilliant. It had been cool. It had been totally and completely unfair.

Rose ignored that last thought and focused on waving the Snitch and being hugged and cheered by the Slytherins, and later, on performing

a victory lap around the pitch. She'd won, not fair and square, but by hook and crook, but so what? She'd won, hadn't she? It didn't matter how you won, she tried to convince herself, as long as you *won*. That was the main thing. No matter what the cost, you had to *win*. And if it involved cobbing, so what? It was Jordan's fault he hadn't cheated and tried to win the match, not hers that Madam Hooch hadn't caught onto her cobbing. It wasn't a crime as long as you weren't caught, right?

## ***The Mirror of Erised***

*"It's not cheating unless you get caught and if you get caught lie through your teeth."*

- Anonymous

The letters from Uncle Padfoot, generously doused with lavish praise and complimentary clichés, were getting kind of boring. So was the money, which she had no other option but to store. There was no way to buy anything with it since first-years weren't allowed out of the Castle Grounds and she had no inclination to queue up in front of shady vendors of forbidden substances like Nott and Zabini did. The only good the money did was to provide her with an opportunity to rattle it smugly in front of Draco's glum face.

She was doing so, as obnoxiously as possible, one chilly Saturday morning in the Common Room, while Draco finished his Herbology essay.

"Will you please, please shut it?" he snarled finally, patience cracking, looking very sour. "Or will I be forced to set Crabbe and Goyle on you?"

"I am ashamed of you, Draco Malfoy," she said gravely, jangling her – or, more accurately, Uncle Padfoot's – coins. "Most ungentlemanly of you, to set two baboons on such a magnificent and wonderful lady as myself! Tsk, tsk and forsooth, for thou art a knave!"

"You don't even make sense," he muttered, turning to his essay. "Sweet Morgana, why do I even waste time trying to civilize you?"

"That's not what you're supposed to say," she interjected brightly. "Neville wouldn't have."

"Run off and flirt with him, then," Draco grunted.

"Twice art thou a knave with instincts too base, too vile to fall upon genteel folk!" she squealed. "Dost thou knowest not we two are like brother and sister and it wouldst be incest for us to flirt? Besides," she said, trying to look dejected. "He is locked up in a dark tower with the

most dastardly Sir Quintus and it would require a mighty host of vampires to vanquish him and his garlic-fortified turban.”

“Quirrell doesn’t live in a dark tower,” Draco said absently. “He used to be a Hufflepuff and he has his cozy, little office near the kitchens. Probably where he gets that never-ending supply of garlic from...”

“Artistic license may transform a bright kitchen-y office into a dark tower,” Rose said seriously. “And scoff not at the power of the almighty garlic! Tis most powerful, young squire!”

“Yeah, yeah... who taught you to speak like that?” Draco demanded.

“Uncle Padfoot!” Rose squealed.

“And who,” Draco demanded, signing his name on his essay with a flourish and rolling it into his bag, “Who is Uncle Padfoot?”

“My godfather!”

“And, your godfather is...”

“Very, very dashing. Even more than Tracey’s brother.”

“Roger Davies,” Draco said firmly, “is not dashing. Cedric Diggory is.”

Rose collapsed in giggles. “You notice things like that?”

“No!” Draco howled, cheeks bright pink. “I just said it because you mentioned it...”

“Oh my God, oh my God, Pansy won’t be able to marry you because you’re –”

“Shut up!” Draco bawled, reaching out to put his hand over her mouth. He lost his balance, toppled over the table between them, and fell on top of Rose, who screamed even before he tumbled into her lap and tried to dodge to avoid him. She lost her balance too and tripped over her armrest, to the floor, Draco’s head ramming solidly into her gut. The armchair could hardly be expected to bear their combined weight

while they were both falling and it too, crashed loudly and lay on it's side in the floor, a leg suspended stupidly in air.

Rose found herself lying on the floor, her legs wrapped around the arm of the fallen chair, Draco's face in her stomach and his body stretched on top of hers. The whole Common Room turned to stare at them and Rose could feel, or rather, sense, Draco's face warming. She let out a laugh, feeling ridiculously hysterical, and not quite knowing what was expected of her, waved an airy hand towards the staring Slytherins. *Play it cool. Act as if you're in control, even if you aren't. It always works*, hadn't Uncle Padfoot told her that, once?

It worked this time and, after a few sniggers and eye-rolls, the rest of the Common Room turned back to the all-consuming daily tasks at hand – homework, snogging, and besmirching reputations.

Draco groaned softly and detached himself from Rose's stomach. "I am going to kill you," he hissed violently, catching his bag and stalking towards the exit. Rose rubbed her stomach, wincing – Draco really did need to start working on a diet-plan. Gathering Uncle Padfoot's letter and Draco's beautiful eagle-feather quill, which he'd forgotten, she scuttled after him, abdomen still sore.

"Oi! Wait up!" she yelled as he swept up the stone staircases at a furious pace. For all that he was an inch shorter than her; he could be fast when he wanted to. "Oh, will you *please*..." Really, he was dramatic. She hadn't done anything to him, had she? He'd been the one to ram his fat head into her poor tummy and here she was, being angelically good, and trying to return his quill to him (no, she wasn't going to make fun of him when she reached him, the thought had never entered her head!) and, oh, this was getting *ridiculous*.

She huffed and leaned against the Great Staircase, clutching her stomach wearily. She watched him pound up the stairs, three at a time, the back of his neck pink. She considered ripping his quill to shreds – her stomach *did* hurt – but thought better of it. It was a lovely quill and who knew, maybe she could sell it to Pansy as a souvenir.

"...Then I'll tell..."



“...But you have no evidence, what are you going to say?”

“...I'll tell your friends, Longbottom and Potter...”

Rose had been sitting on the stairs, arms around her stomach, eyes shut. But she blinked her eyes open at the sound of her name and just saw the figures of two boys, one red-headed, the other blond, whipping up the stairs. Was that, could it be, *Ron*?

She hurried up the stairs, making sure to stay out of the two boys' line of sight – some basic instinct told her it wouldn't be to her best interests to make herself known to Ron at this point. He was a quiet chap, most of the time, but there was no doubt that he could best her in a duel. She crouched in the shadows, slid behind suits of armor and statues, and pretended to be observing tapestries as the two boys strode up staircases, through corridors and classrooms. Sometimes she lost sight of them, but not often. Ron's hair was like a beacon, something he'd once mentioned he hated. She heard little of what he and his blonde friend were talking about, just snatches in angry tones that confused her.

They had passed the library now, and had entered a deserted corridor. Rose tiptoed far behind them, wishing her hair was longer, so it could cover her face. It really was nonsensically short, hardly down to her earlobes. Still, it was easier to listen to them now, in an empty passageway.

“...And what about you? What were you doing?”

“You're not in a place to be throwing accusations...”

“I wasn't accusing, I just...”

“Some things, laddie-boy, must never be revealed...”

“Charming, aren't you?”

“I do try.”

There was a tall suit of armor near a door in the passageway and Ron and his blonde friend – or foe, by the sound of their conversation

– headed towards it. Ron opened the door and the two entered – and shut the door behind them. Rose didn't feel like making a scene and pouncing upon them – that sort of behavior was reserved solely for when conversing with Draco. She'd just have to wait until the two emerged, but somewhere they couldn't see her.

She paused in the hallway, uncertain of which path to take.

"Lost, miss?" a cheerful voice asked. She turned, startled, and found the Fat Friar behind her.

"Not really," she muttered. "Just need a place to hide..."

The Fat Friar raised two delicately-sculpted, transparent brows. Up close, Rose saw that he was actually rather attractive. His plumpness suited him, as did his silvery-ness. She wondered if he was an ancestor of Cedric Diggory's.

"I'm tailing two boys," she explained, not quite knowing why she was telling him this. "They went there." She pointed.

"And their names were..." the Friar prompted, smiling kindly down at her.

"Ron Weasley," she said, wondering why the words came out, wondering why she was giving away her friend. "And a blonde bloke."

The Friar nodded, still smiling. "And you would like to visit the room after they've left, hmm? Miss..."

"Rose Potter," she supplied.

"Ah, yes," the Friar said. "Well, I would recommend the room, next-door. It's quite safe, just a disused classroom."

Rose nodded and slipped inside. The Friar followed her in. She pressed her ears against the door, waiting for the *click* that would signal that the boys had left the room.

“Do you have any idea?” the Friar asked conversationally, floating a few feet from her. “Why those two young gentlemen would be tempted to visit that room?”

“Not really,” Rose shrugged, bumping her shoulder against the wood. “Ron likes exploring the castle. He always does it alone, though.”

“At night, perhaps?” the Friar asked gravely.

Rose shrugged, once again bumping her shoulder. “He doesn’t tell us much, really.”

She heard the door click open and waited for the boys to walk away. “Bye,” she told the Friar, who smiled and waved her off. She slipped inside the room and shut the door behind her.

It looked like a disused classroom. Desks and chairs were piled against the walls and there was an upturned waste-paper basket – but propped against the wall facing him was something that didn’t look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way. It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*.

Curious, Rose stepped towards it – she’d never known Ron was a connoisseur of mirrors; that was more of Ginny’s department – and waited to see her reflection form. But it didn’t and Rose stared at it, confused. The glass was fuzzy, flashing lines of black, white, and red that seemed to slide into one-another, forming patterns of pink-and-grey that swum and changed as soon as she tried to look at them properly. Occasionally, something swum into greater focus, into something that was recognizable, but only for a flash of a few seconds, out of the mist of grey and pink, more grey than pink.

It was disconcerting enough, all the pink and grey – two colors she thoroughly disliked – but the images she could understand that slid in every once-in-awhile, for a second or three, those were the most disturbing. Things like a tall, beautiful, green-eyed, young woman in Slytherin Quidditch Robes, holding the House Cup and laughing, her arm around a tall... She felt nauseated, horrified, as if everything bad

in her mind was coming up to the surface, naked to the world. She stumbled a step back, and the mirror turned back into an ornately-framed circle of glass.

Surprised, she stepped back in front of it and it was once again a fuzz of grey and pink. But the images were rising faster, staying longer, clearer now, and more frightening. And the same, tall, beautiful, green-eyed woman featured in all of them, flying through the air, dueling, hair flying, and eyes sparkling with madness. There she was and a bloody corpse next to her – Rose let out a real scream of horror when she recognized the corpse – and no, there was the woman in long, sweeping robes in front of a bowing crowd that stretched on into infinity, but there she was again, in a bride's gown, smiling up at a man...

Rose managed to break the trance when she saw the man's face again, saw him wink lightly at her, then turn to the beautiful, cruel bride in the mirror, a bride whose identity she already knew and was revolted to know. She ran out of the room, feet flying, pounding down the staircases, out through the packed Great Hall, through the grounds, tears splashing down.

**000**

"What happened to you?" Ron demanded as Rose stalked up to him in the library. Her face was as white as chalk, eyes red-rimmed, cheeks wet.

"Who was it?" she snarled fiercely and then paused to cough. "That blonde kid you took to that Erised place today?"

"I – what?" Ron demanded, face pale. "I didn't..."

"You *liar*," she hissed. "Tell me this moment or I'll...I'll..." Her bright green eyes were already brimming with tears.

"Don't cry!" he hissed, voice as fierce as hers. He pulled her down and handed her his handkerchief. She blew into it and took a great, shuddering breath. She was still crying when she emerged from it, but they were little tears, passionless, because it was hard to stop crying completely after she'd been crying for so long.

"It was that Gryffindor, Zacharias Smith," Ron said as soon as she wasn't making crying-noises. "But how do you –?"

"Why was he threatening you?"

"Why should I tell you?" Ron snapped, feeling angry again, now that she'd stopped wailing. He waited for her to plead with him – that was always her way. But he'd stand firm today; he wouldn't fall to her coaxing again. She didn't need to know anything. But instead of begging, as was expected, she did something he wasn't prepared for.

"Oh you won't!" Rose half-yelled, causing heads to turn in the library. "Well, I bet you'll tell everything to Padma or perhaps that Granger girl! Well, *fine*, you can have your stupid girlfriends because I don't care!"

"They're a good deal cleverer than you," Ron said coldly, trying not to get up and slap her across her stupid face. "At least they don't blubber and cry like little children."

Rose gave an enraged shriek and before he quite knew what had happened, Ron was soundly slapped on the face by a girl for the first time in his life. It was hardly exhilarating. Then she hurried from the library, already crying. Ron rubbed his face wearily, wondering if they were friends anymore.

**000**

Rose shivered in bed. She'd gone to bed at eleven in the morning, not feeling up to dealing with life in general, and fallen asleep for a solid twelve hours. Now, she was hungry – she'd only had breakfast – and though she felt too weak to get up from her warm bed, her stomach was growling. She'd just pad down to the kitchens; Uncle Padfoot once said the house-elves down there were more than willing to serve one.

Wrapping a cloak clumsily around her pajamas, she climbed up the stairs from the dungeons. Her head was pounding madly, her feet were freezing, and she was ready to fall down, but she didn't. She was stronger than she knew.

“Miss Potter?” a sharp voice asked. She turned and saw Professor Snape, standing in a dark niche. “You should be in bed now.”

“Yessir,” she muttered, exhausted. Something in her voice must have attracted his attention, for he strode towards her, frowning.

“Are you unwell?” he asked, his voice a little less sharp than before. “Do you require the infirmary?”

“No sir, just the kitchens.”

“You were absent for lunch and dinner, weren’t you?” Snape frowned. Rose wondered how he’d noticed that.

“Well,” he said, sounding a little uncertain now. “I suppose you are hungry?” Without waiting for an answer, he beckoned her forwards and marched down the staircases. Like a zombie, she followed him, and finally they were in a dark room, which he quickly lit. *Must be his office*, she thought, too tired to examine it more thoroughly. Her bones ached.

Then he was in front of her and handing her food – Chocolate Frogs, Ginger Newts and other sweets in the form of grotesque animals. “Drink this,” he said and handed her a mug. She took a deep gulp obediently and a pleasant something, warm, buttery flowed down. She felt a lot better.

“Butterbeer,” he said quietly. “Though perhaps you are too young to sample it.”

Rose smiled sleepily and dug into the food. Looking very awkward, he took a seat across from her. Only when her head began to nod from the food did he shake her awake.

“Come,” he said and took her down to the Slytherin Common Room. He waited until she was climbing up the stairs to the girls’ dormitories before he left.

## ***Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin***

*She'd always felt so very real amongst the princesses her family bred so proudly; she didn't feel real in this muggle house, surrounded by Muggles who tried (and failed) not to stare at her, the strange, foreign princess in their midst. She'd been born as good as noble, the ancient Black blood in her veins. Black Princesses, Druella had called her three lovely daughters, the highest of the high.*

## **Merry and Bright by Lady Altair**

It was a cold, frost-white November night. A quiet night too, meant for fireside reunions, very snug too. Very picture-postcardish, from the wind whistling through the small village to the little windows of the little houses gleaming goldenly from within to the delicate snowflakes floating gently down like the blessings of angels.

There was a pretty, little hill near the outskirts of the village, frost-white like a bride's veil now, and on it perched a pretty, little house, nearly as white, with rosy-shuttered windows and a welcoming look about it. It was worthy enough of a perfect picture postcard; it looked so simple and plain, so dear and innocuous, so normal...

With a very faint *pop*, a slim, hooded figure appeared out of thin air on top of the hill, a few feet from the door of the little house. The figure set off with long, quick strides towards the house, its long cloak rustling against the snow. It rapped impatiently on the door with a delicate, pale fist. Presently, a woman with soft, light brown hair opened the door and the cloaked figure threw back its hood. It was a woman, beautiful but not young, with long, shining, blond hair and keen, piercing, blue eyes. The two women looked at each other for a moment.

"Mother," the woman at the door greeted her, mustering up a strained smile, and opened the door wider. "Why, this is a surprise..."

Her mother swept inside and shrugged off her cloak; snow already glistened on her shoulders. "I'm not here for a chat, Droma," she said, her voice as cold and haughty as her face. "I've business."

Droma nodded and led her into a dainty, little parlor full of pretty tables and plants – aspidistras, miniature Flutterby bushes, black roses with white hearts... She hastily waved her wand and a warm fire crackled to life in the fireplace and light blossomed from the scented candles.

“Ted’s not home yet,” she said, sweeping as gracefully as her mother onto a divan. “They overwork him...” Her voice sounded uneasy, wary, and her light eyes darted hither and thither, her heart-shaped face pale and uncomfortable.

Her mother’s eyelids dropped elaborately down over her eyes and Droma fell silent. “It’s about your Aunt Walburga,” her mother said abruptly, without opening her eyes, voice clipped. “She’s dying.”

“She’s been dying for the last twenty years,” Droma said quietly, contemptuously clenching and unclenching her hands. “What’s so special about it, now? That vile buzzard certainly takes her time about dying.”

Her mother’s eyes blazed open. She flashed her daughter an appalled half-glance. “I did not raise you to speak so uncouthly of your elders, Andromeda,” she said coldly.

“You didn’t raise me to marry a Muggle-born either,” Andromeda replied coolly, crossing and uncrossing her legs restlessly. Her eyes, blue like her mother’s, but paler, sharper, flashed warningly.

“My Black Princesses,” her mother murmured, scorn ringing in every word. “Look how they turned out – my three beautiful, intelligent, well-bred girls. I did not raise my eldest daughter to be a senseless fool, did I? The only one of you children – and I include *that* boy and poor, little Regulus as well – who managed to turn out even half-well was Narcissa.”

“And yet,” Andromeda said, a half-smile playing across the corners of her delicately-sculpted mouth – a mouth almost uncannily like her mother’s –, “and yet, you still visit us all. Crazy Bella, Muggleborn-loving Droma, and Cissy, who’s hopelessly, most *vulgarly* in love with her husband. Tea, mother?”



“No thank you, my dear,” her mother said calmly. “Love is a cumbersome thing in nine cases out of ten, yes, but I wouldn’t go so far as to call it vulgar,” she said, looking superbly disdainful of the word ‘love’. “I actually found it in me to fall in love with your father after Cissy was born.”

“More like you fell in love with the man who helped you give birth to precious, little Cissy,” Andromeda sneered, leaning forwards, a long curtain of soft, brown hair brushing against her pale face. “Beautiful, graceful Narcissa with her picture-perfect, little family and her impeccably pro-genocidal tendencies – what an honor to give birth to such a daughter!”

“It is, isn’t it?” her mother said lightly. Her delicate rose-petal lips curved slightly upwards, her cerulean eyes sparkling with amusement. It was easy to see that she had once been an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Her daughter leaned back into her seat, looking like she didn’t want to smile but couldn’t help but do so under this, rare, show of her mother’s pleasure.

“You do love me, even though you won’t admit it,” Andromeda said simply. “And you loved father long before even Bella was born, you loved him like Cissy loves Lucius – though I can’t understand why – madly, passionately, insanely...”

Walburga had been a Black through and through, she’d been the one to disinherit her son and niece, and she’d been the one to infuse the Black fire, passion, and madness – the Black Curse – into young Bellatrix. Druella had been a Rosier girl, the perfect pureblood princess, a butterfly, yes, but a butterfly crafted of iron. She had never let go of her daughters.

“*He* was the one who came from a mad, passionate, insane line – not me. I was the one who bequeathed the Metamorphagus gift to the children,” her mother reminded her. “A gift, which both Bellatrix and Nymphadora seem to be putting to good use.” Her eyes sparkled with malice now. “Your daughter’s turning out to be a fine young girl – quite a beauty if I do say so myself. Along the Black line of beauty, of course, just like yourself and dear Bella. In fact, I might go so far as to say that she takes more after Bellatrix than you, and in far more than

looks – the same grit, fire, why even the same special gifts. After all, they're linked closely together aren't they – blood'll speak for them in the end."

"Madam Lestrangle," Andromeda said coldly, "was, and still is, a Death Eater. There can be no comparison between her and Dora – none at all!"

Silence stretched between them once again as they stared at the dancing flames in the hearth, both lost in memories of a heavy-lidded, wild-eyed, girl, whose laughter rang in their minds like shattering glass, a girl who was dead to her sister and whom her mother numbered as one of the departed in spirit.

"She won't last until New Year," her mother said softly, returning to the prior topic of discussion, Walburga Black's approaching demise. "She's had the will altered again – most of the jewels and the little, er, *things*..."

"The poisons and other items of questionable origin she has tucked up in her little vaults at Gringotts?" Andromeda interrupted.

Her mother ignored her. "Those things are to be left to Bella; most of the tertiary estates – and perhaps a few of the secondary holdings, too, I think – are for Cissy and her son. That still leaves the matter of the primary acreages. You know of the edict, sealed by magic, blood, and Unbreakable Vows made centuries ago, that they revert to the eldest male heir in the direct line of descent. Walburga has no control over the matter."

"So," Andromeda drew a deep breath. "Grimmauld Place, Columns on the Teche, Lockwind – they're all going to Sirius?"

"And then to Bella on his death – that is, unless that boy changes the will."

"He can't change his will," Andromeda interrupted. "You said Walburga couldn't."

Her mother fixed a steely stare on her. "If there are no remaining male heirs in the direct line of descent, the proprietor has the choice

to permit the line of succession to take its natural course, or to alter it. While that boy survives, there is no hope for Walburga to bequeath the property to Bella, much as she desires it." She looked at her daughter sharply, and suddenly comprehension dawned on Andromeda.

"That's why you came to visit me? You want me to tell Sirius about this... business?" Andromeda asked. "He won't take it well."

"He may take it however he chooses. He may choose to kill himself and I would applaud that act as heartily as Bella," her mother sniffed in contempt. "And that is not the only reason I came here today." She took a deep breath, steeling herself for something. The words came out unwillingly from nearly clenched jaws, her lovely face hard and unreadable. "She always set a great deal by funerals. She hasn't said anything about it, of course, but I've known her for years and I can gauge her moods and there's been something eating at the back of her mind. Naturally, I'm taking a great liberty, the presumption itself is...well, she'd blast me off the Family Tapestry if she ever heard of this..." She closed her eyes wearily, silent. Then she spoke and her voice was remarkably soft for her. "He is her son, after all. She might not care for the relation he bears to her, but...there lingers an incredible spirit of quixotism in all of us. She's a Black by blood and marriage, both, Andromeda. You know how odd she is..."

Andromeda's face was white, her eyes huge in her shocked face. "Mother, you can't mean that she wants him at her funeral! She would *never*..."

"Walburga Black is a strange woman," her mother said quietly, rising. "Do not even try to guess what goes on in her mind. Good night to you, I must leave now. I'm keeping her company at Grimmauld Place and she'll rise from her little nap any moment now..." She reached across the table that separated them and pressed her daughter's hand. "You will make Sirius understand how important it is, won't you?"

"I'll try," Andromeda said, thinking that it would take nothing short of the Imperius Curse to get Sirius Black to attend his mother's funeral. Her mother kissed her hand. "That's my good little girl," she said, her

voice surprisingly warm and approving, and then, with a faint *pop*, disappeared.

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“Yes,” Sirius said. Andromeda gaped at him. She’d succeeded on her first attempt and it was highly discomfiting.

“Repeat that again,” she managed to choke out.

“Yes,” Sirius repeated, scowling. He lay, sprawled out full-length, on his magnificent burgundy, velvet chaise lounge. Sirius had flamboyant taste as his London apartment – crammed to bursting with exotic, expensive items such as *Mimulus Mimbletonias* in tenth-century stone urns and solid-gold telescopes – bore testimony to.

“I don’t believe you,” Andromeda said flatly, sinking into a couch crafted entirely of feathers – swan, peacock, flamingo, even phoenix – set in sandalwood frames.

“Don’t even try to,” he said, looking irritable. “I’m taking Rose though.” *Somehow, I doubt even you can charm her mother enough to bring her to the funeral. A child in Grimmauld Place – it’s simply sacrilegious and she’ll be having nightmares for weeks!*

He smiled proudly, “she’s been made Slytherin Seeker, did you know?”

*I bet you tell everyone you can about that.* Outwardly, she managed a sweet smile. “Yes. You must be very proud. And she’s only a first year, too.”

His smile widened. “And she won her first match in five minutes flat, brilliant I tell you, a work of genius...”

*It might have been a work of genius. It might equally as well have been an honest fluke. With an eleven-year-old, I’d tend to believe the latter.* “I know, Dora wrote to me,” Andromeda said. She looked up at him from underneath her heavy lids, still smiling, and murmured, “Just like Regulus isn’t she?”

She didn't know why she'd said that and immediately felt sorry for saying it. It was just that Sirius was so obviously in love with his annoying, little goddaughter – and she *was* annoying, that Potter toerag's brat through and through, there was nothing of sweet Lily in the child – and he was in a funny mood – why in Merlin's name had he accepted it so fast? Mother's line about quixotism was nothing but a pile of doxy droppings! – and she couldn't understand it, and then there'd always been that nasty, little, petty undercurrent in her nature...

She'd been Sirius's favorite cousin, yes, but that had only been because Bellatrix was raving insane and Narcissa was just *Narcissa*, the kind of girl boys fell in love with easily, the kind of girl who saw boys only as willing slaves and nothing more. That left only Andromeda, but just because she was less fanatical than Bellatrix and more genuine than Narcissa didn't mean that Sirius and she were unduly fond of each other.

Sirius looked furious. He was breathing hard too, and clenching and unclenching his hands – always a bad sign. Andromeda knew when to backtrack. "I'm sorry," she said frankly. "That wasn't fair of me; I just wondered why you'd agreed so easily."

"A Slytherin through and through," he said under his breath.

"Please forgive me," she said quietly, grabbing one of his fists and carefully unclenching it. "Mmm, what did you say?"

"I'm going," he stressed out every syllable, "because she'll be *dead* then. She'll be a sight better off then, instead of now, when she's alive. I'm going to gloat. I'm going to laugh at all of those damn, two-faced twats."

Andromeda agreed whole-heartedly with him – though she still didn't understand why he wanted to go to the funeral, even to see his dead mother. Somehow, his words about only going to gloat seemed to ring... false. That couldn't be the reason. Sirius loved pranks as a boy, but he wasn't a boy any longer. He was thirty-two, an adult. He wouldn't attend his mother's funeral just for the sake of a laugh. Maybe it could be one of the reasons... but the only reason? No.

“Everyone will be coming,” she said softly. “The whole family – does this mean that you’re actually growing up and coming to terms with what you did when you were sixteen?”

“You’re going, aren’t you?” he said coldly, not even waiting for her affirmative nod. “Does this mean you’re actually growing up and coming to terms with what you did when you were eighteen?”

“I came to terms with that long before,” she reminded him coolly. “I’ve seen Narcissa and her son and they’ve seen Dora, and mother comes over –”

“Every six months,” Sirius smirked. “To see if you’re dead yet, then she can drag her *real* daughters, her lovely, dutiful, socially-acceptable daughters to your grave and sob for a while – and perhaps hand Dora some of their old trinkets – and then go home happily and tell everyone the damned blood-traitor brat wouldn’t disgrace them by her existence any longer. They hate you as much as I do them, darling Droma. You’re just too naïve to see it. Don’t fool yourself into assuming that those Gorgons are capable of human emotions.”

Andromeda stood up. It was all she could do to manage in her chilliest voice, “I’ll be seeing you there, then?”

He smirked and made a great show of kissing her hand. He loved her as much as she loved him, and it wasn’t much by any count.

## ***Copper and Black***

*The gods may throw a dice  
Their minds as cold as ice  
And someone way down here  
Loses someone dear  
The winner takes it all  
The loser has to fall  
It's simple and it's plain  
Why should I complain.*

### ***ABBA - The Winner Takes It All***

Rose stumbled down to the Common Room late on Sunday morning, yawning hugely and wondering whether it was time for breakfast or lunch. She'd completely forgotten about what had happened the day before, though, while dressing, she'd been conscious of a vague, background feeling of depression dampening her I-Love-Sundays mood. The reality, and the same beat-out feeling that haunted her last night rendering her numb to Snape's office, came crashing down on her at the sight of Neville's stubborn face at the bottom of the staircase to the girls' dormitories.

"Where were you?" he demanded, looking furious. He grabbed hold of her elbow and practically dragged her off the staircase. "I was worried sick, and what was that about Ron, and..."

"Hungry?" Draco asked, hovering near Neville's elbow. He patiently untangled Neville from Rose's arm. "It's eleven. You must be starving."

"Not really," Rose breathed out, feeling very old.

"Of course, she's hungry!" Neville snapped. "And, of course, she pretends that she's not so I can worry some more! How jolly! Let's have a tea party, shall we, and pretend everything's fine and dandy!"

Draco sent him a funny look. Without prelude, Neville practically hauled her out of the Common Room, through the dungeons, into the Great Hall, a murderous look on his face, occasionally throwing out a stinging sentence about how much he'd worried, how the girls'

staircase didn't allow boys to go up, and how utterly, completely *irresponsible* she was and badly needed a Howler, and just wait, he'd write to her parents, he would...

He ladled lunch onto her plate, glowering fiercely. Draco sat by her, looking slightly confused by Neville's rage.

"Relax," he finally said, as Rose began to eat. "She's here, safe and sound. Nothing to worry about."

"*Nothing to worry out?*" Neville squeaked, looking homicidal. "I haven't seen her for goodness knows how many hours and I'm expected to *not worry!* You have no experience with her; you don't know what she can get up to in the space of a few hours..."

"I was only seven, then," Rose protested, slightly cheered by the food. Some of the numbness was beginning to dissipate. "I thought cars were cool."

"Cars?" Draco asked stupidly. "What's cars?"

"Muggle contraptions used for transportation," Neville said irately. "And just because you thought cars were cool, does not mean..."

"I'm not completely irresponsible, you know," she smiled at him. "And it wasn't like anything got broken permanently."

"Except the car, of course," Neville said. "And oh, I don't suppose losing a finger and a tooth and half-a-rib counts as nothing."

"I was healed," Rose pointed out.

"Then!" he snarled. "What about now, what if there are no healers nearby..."

"There's an infirmary," Draco pointed out.

"I KNOW!" Neville bellowed. Luckily, the Great Hall was relatively empty and the staff wasn't present. "But it's not like people don't *die*, you know, even if they're not a hundred-and-seventy-nine. You are so *stupid!*"



Rose knew she deserved it, so she nodded gracefully. She didn't mind it so much, Neville was right – though she didn't see how she could have acted other than she had yesterday, so she was right too – and he wasn't really angry, just venting out frustration, blowing off steam, like Uncle Padfoot would say. Ron, though, yesterday she'd made him mad and...

Dear Lord, she'd forgotten about him.

"Where's Ron?" she demanded, getting up.

"Eat your veggies," Draco sang.

She ignored him and turned to Neville. He was eying her with a look in his eye that she didn't like. "Where is he?" she repeated, turning to look at the Ravenclaw Table. No familiar redhead there.

"What was it with you and Ron in the library?" Neville asked quietly. "You really were very loud and you said something about him and girls..." He was frowning, looking as if he was trying to make sense of a senseless matter. "Ron never yells at anyone."

"Personal matter," she answered, scanning the Gryffindor Table. She didn't see the odd, startled expression that crossed Neville's face.

"Do you really need to talk to him, now?" Neville asked quietly. She nodded absently. "He said that he'd be in the Azure Cupola on the Fifth Floor, if you needed him."

"Thanks," she said and hurried away, brooding on what she was going to say.

"May I now say that Rose Weasley is a preposterous name?" Draco asked Neville, as soon as Rose was out of ear-shot.

"It's her business," Neville said quietly.

**000**

Ron was curled up on a window-seat in the spacious, window-filled Azure Cupola, a book in his hand. Bushy-haired Miss Granger was sitting next to him, reading too.

Rose sidled up to the pair of them, uncertain of what to do. She didn't want the Granger girl listening to her, now. "Ron?" she finally asked, tentatively. He turned up to her and didn't look startled to see her. Granger, however, did. Her mouth opened stupidly and she squeaked something about using the facilities before practically running off. Ron patted the wide window-seat and Rose nervously perched on the edge of it. Her hands were sweating.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"What?" Ron asked, quarter-smiling.

"I'm..." she began to repeat.

"I heard it the first time," he said dismissively and stretched out a cautious hand. "Friends?"

Rose grinned and took it.

"So," he said, putting down his book. "Why did you yell at me yesterday? Oh, never mind," he said suddenly, as she opened her mouth. "It doesn't matter anymore, now."

Ron knew how to draw her out. "Yes it does!" she hissed fiercely. "I was nasty and stupid and perfectly horrible to you and you should never have forgiven me!"

"Padma was of the same opinion," Ron sighed. "And no, I'm not in love with her or Hermione – or even Michael." Rose chuckled.

"Hermione?" she asked.

"Granger," he said, looking surprised. "Don't tell me you don't know her name?"

Rose shrugged.

“So,” he said. “What did you see in the Mirror?”

She recoiled from him instantly, blanching.

“It’s alright,” he said hastily. “Sorry. Do you want to hear what Smith and I saw?”

She nodded, still a little pale.

“I,” he said, half-smiling, his voice very gentle. “I saw my family. Mum, Dad, Bill, Charlie, Percy, the twins, Ginny, and me – without the scar.” He gestured bitterly. “We looked so happy there.” He looked sad and happy at the same time, and turned abruptly from Rose, staring determinedly out of the window, blinking back what Rose guessed was tears. Still staring out of the window he said, “Smith saw his family too, and him without his scar.”

“It didn’t show me my family,” Rose blurted out. Then she blushed as Ron whirled around to look at her, frank interest on his face.

“Erised,” Ron said softly. “Read it backwards and it spells Desire.”

Rose blushed harder than ever.

“It shows us what we desire then,” Ron said dreamily, speaking more to himself than to her. “Like what Smith and I – and maybe even Susan Bones – wants most of all is to be with our families again, because...” Rose expected him to leave his sentence unfinished – he never spoke of the day his family had been massacred. “Because of that day,” he said quietly, and suddenly the words were spilling out, raw wounds he’d taken care never to open, to no one. Rose wondered why he was telling her at all.

“I don’t remember anything,” he said. “Nothing except that it hurt, getting that scar – and the bodies, of course. I woke up sometime around twilight, in the kitchen, and there they were, all seven of them, right in front of me, dead. And do you know what was slashed on their bodies? The whole word Blood Traitor, starting from Dad’s forehead to Mum’s face to Bill’s neck to...”

“Stop,” she squeaked, sick. But he didn’t. “...Charlie’s chest, Percy’s ribs – I could see the bone – George’s stomach – I saw his guts spilling out – and Fred’s legs! And I was screaming and they wanted to Oblivate the memory later but I wouldn’t let them, I wouldn’t, goddamn it!” He sounded furious and his face was murderous. “And Auntie Muriel told me it was that Lestrage and I found a Chocolate Frog Card that day of her – I showed you, remember? But I didn’t remember because she and her gang Oblivated it and there’s no way I’ve got proof she was responsible because you can’t get back Oblivated memories!”

He was shaking with rage, his knuckles white, clenching and unclenching the bars on the windows. “One day,” he said quietly, “I’m going to hunt her down and kill her.”

He leaned his forehead against the window-panes. “Go,” he whispered. “Just – go.” She fled, sickened and horrified, misery washing over in heavy waves.

**000**

Rose flew into the Slytherin Common Room, panting. She’d searched the Great Hall, library, part of the grounds, and had even considered going to Quirrell, for Neville. But she’d abandoned the idea and decided to finally search the Common Room. Draco and Neville were playing chess by the fireside, Draco playing black and Neville white.

She threw herself into a settee next to them and gasped out, “Neville, you have to hear this!”

“I already am,” Neville said, frowning in concentration. “I’m still mad at you.”

“It’s about Ron!” Rose wheezed. “Ron and *that* day!”

“Which day would that be?” Draco asked, posture perfect, watching Neville squint at the board.

Rose turned towards him and opened her mouth to speak, but then stopped abruptly. Little fragments, heard long ago, unimportant, little matters she’d remembered by mere fluke and had never given a

thought to, suddenly began to piece themselves together in her mind, and she realized she could never tell Draco what Ron had told her. *Smith said Draco's mother was Narcissa Black, Bellatrix Lestrangle's sister. The murderess. The madwoman. The one against whom nothing had ever been proved, against whom nothing would ever be proved. She did that to Ron.*

A surge of hatred, like an electric shock, flashed through her body and she clenched the armrests of the settee tightly. No wonder Smith hated Draco. No wonder, at all. And here she'd been for the last two months, teasing Draco, laughing with him, flying once in a while, playing chess and Gobstones, and helping him write his DADA essays while he helped her in Transfiguration. She loathed herself. He was vile and disgusting and horrible because of his aunt and she wished that she could slap him. She would slap him if he opened his dirty mouth once again, oh yes, she would, and she would kill him, the nasty little...

"Hellooooooooooo?" Draco asked, waving a hand in front of her face. "What's up –?"

She acted on reflex. She slapped him hard on the hand, and with a cry, he dropped it. A bright red hand-mark was already blooming on his pale skin.

"Rose?" Neville asked, looking up from the chessboard. "Rose?"

But Draco had already jumped up, looking indignant. He fumbled around for his wand but Rose was too quick for him. Like lightning, her wand was in her hand and she was pointing it at his throat, while Neville gaped at them in bewilderment.

"You despicable *ferret*," she snarled, getting up. She was taller than him by an inch, and she was grateful for that. "Have you any idea –"

"I'm sure we can settle this without wands," Neville squeaked, gripping their hands, and forcing them down. "C'mon, Rose..."

"She *insulted* me," Draco fumed, not sitting down. "By the laws of what is right and proper in..."

“Oh, save the etiquette,” Rose spat. “If you’d followed, if your precious auntie, had followed the laws of right and proper then – Neville, let me go – Ron’s family would still be alive!”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” Draco hissed, very pale now. “That my Aunt Bella, that she...”

“She’s very sorry for whatever she might have said,” Neville said firmly, covering her mouth with both hands. She wanted to bite him. In her ear, though, he hissed, “Drop it. Now.”

“Fine!” she spat into his hand, lashing out at him with her feet. He let go of her. Draco was looking down at them both with a mixture of contempt and fury in his expression.

“My aunt is a highly respected woman,” he said coldly. “The Wizengamot tried her and were unable to prove her guilty – not that a question of that could ever arise! I think you might take their verdict.”

“With an ocean-ful of salt-grains,” Rose said viciously. “They were bribed, coerced, anything you want! I *know*, my father knows, he kept on saying it was a horribly corrupt affair when I was five and it happened! And he’s an Auror.”

“My father is on the Board of Governors for Hogwarts!” Draco snarled. “He is...”

“Filthy rich!” Rose bellowed. “Black money all the way through!”

For a moment, he looked like he was going to hit her. Then he drew back. His voice was as cold as his eyes as he said, “I do not care to be insulted anymore. I do not wish to inflict my presence upon you anymore, Miss Potter. Nor do I intend to consort with the sort of riff-raff that you mingle so freely with, Mr Longbottom. Good day.” He swept them a stately bow and marched up the staircase to the boys’ dormitory.

“Good riddance!” Rose screeched after him. “*What?*” she hissed, looking at Neville. “That was completely justified.”

Neville nodded wearily, as if to placate an over-emotional toddler.

"It was!" she snapped, hating the look on his face. "Absolutely, totally..."

"Enough with the synonyms," Neville sighed. "Just tell me what set you off."

"What set *me* off?" she screeched. "Well, it would have set you off too..."

"Without the unnecessary drama, please," Neville said. "I'll have to go up to Draco after I'm finished psychoanalyzing you. Don't make that face, just tell me the story and I promise I won't interrupt. There, that's a good girl."

Sulkily, Rose told him Ron's story. She was gratified to see him wince and gasp and look horrified at the appropriate moments. True to his promise though, he never uttered a word. Finally, she finished and he leaned back into his armchair, white as a sheet, forehead creased with thought-wrinkles. He ran a hand through his soft, brown hair, looking sick. He was quiet for a few moments while Rose waited expectantly for his reaction, for his rage to spill over as hers had done minutes ago.

But all he said was, "I don't think you're being fair, Rose."

She choked and was about to yell, but he stopped her with an impatient wave of his hand. "Look at it logically," he said, getting up and beginning to pace up and down restlessly. "His *aunt* did it – if she did it all, remember there's no *proof* –"

"You think Ron's a liar?" she raged.

"No, no," he said, looking troubled. "No, he could have been...mistaken. I mean, didn't his Auntie Muriel tell him that she'd done it? He doesn't remember, does he?" He waited for her to mutter "no" before proceeding. "And even if she did do it, well, Draco was five wasn't he? He didn't know anything about it; he couldn't have stopped it, could he? So, well, why blame him?"

"Because –"

“Because he’s related to her? Rose, admit it, you’re biased against him.”

“What reason do I have to be biased against him?” she screeched.

Neville shrugged. “No idea. But well, you have a tendency to be biased against certain things – girls, for instance.”

“I’m a girl!” she half-screamed. “Why would I –?”

“No idea, again. But you are. You think they’re stupid, you always laugh at anything Hannah does or Ginny or now, Pansy and Tracey and Millicent. You think they’re inferior, you always say ‘ah, well, they’re just *girls*’; you think the things they do – playing with dolls, pretend-cooking – is dumb. It’s not.”

“Let’s see you play with dolls, Neville Harfang Longbottom!”

“I don’t swing that way and neither do you. Which is fine, just like playing with dolls if you want is *fine*. So admit it, you’re prejudiced against Draco Malfoy, girls, peas, strawberry-flavored chocolates, the color pink...”

“I get your point!” Rose snapped. “So I’m wrong and that pretty-boy Malfoy is right!”

“Draco is anything but pretty,” Neville winced. “Don’t say things like that, I get bad mental images. You’re not wrong, Rose, no one’s ever wrong.”

“Don’t be stupid. Someone has to be wrong.”

“No,” Neville said quietly. “There’s no wrong or right in this world. Only power and those too weak to see it.”

Rose raised an eyebrow. Neville shrugged and muttered something about Quirrell telling him that. “Draco’ll join us again if I butter him enough and you just say sorry. You have to, you were unfair, you know.”



"I know," she said sulkily. "Though why you want to make up with that prat is beyond me."

"He is my friend," Neville intoned. "You aren't my only friend, Rose – you should have learned that by now. You seem to think I'm your property or something, you can boss me, bully me, manhandle me whatever, but I'm not allowed to do anything of that sort."

Rose frowned. He'd read her mind.

"One more thing, before I go," he said, perching on her armrest. He'd stopped pacing. "You aren't very subtle, either."

"I know, I know – just go away and leave me in peace to dig my grave, now."

Neville ignored her comment. "I knew what you and Draco were up to – no, he didn't tell me. And the thing behind that giant dog is the Philosopher's Stone."

He smirked at her befuddled expression and raced up to the steps to the boys' dormitories before she could stop him, leaving her with a lot to think about.

**000**

Six-year-old Harry Potter was in tears. "Liam Turner has them!" he howled at his mother, spinning on the spot in the kitchen. "Susie Benteen has them! *Everyone* has them! Why can't I have them?"

"Not everyone," his mother reminded him gently, rubbing her aching forehead wearily. There was one thing to be said for Harry that could not be said for Rose – he was tenacious. When he wanted something, he would raise hell and lower heaven to get it. That included foregoing meals for two days, hiding in the attic even though he used to believe it was inhabited by bloodthirsty banshees (courtesy of Rose's bedtime stories), not speaking to anyone for a week, and screaming louder than Sirius during his schooldays, for hours on end.

“Everyone!” Harry screamed, hazel eyes brimming with tears. As Rose had once acidly remarked, he was practically a water-tap waiting to be opened. “Everyone! Everyone!”

“Maybe later?” Lily suggested, keeping an eye on the dinner dutifully cooking itself, flicking her wand once in a while. Rose was probably having dinner now; she liked dinner early. Harry liked dinner late.

“*Nooooo*,” Harry bellowed, tears now falling down his cheeks. “Nononononono! You don’t understand me – you don’t care, you don’t love me, you hate me!”

“I really don’t understand why you –”

“You give Rose everything!” Harry plowed on, stamping his feet. “Everything, everything, everything! You got her a Nimbus 2000!”

“That was Sirius’s doing.”

“Well, then Uncle Padfoot gives her everything!” Harry sniffed. “Just because she’s a *girl* and boys aren’t as special as girls!”

“Darling, that’s not –”

“I *hate* you!” Harry yelled over her amidst tears streaming down his cheeks and his nose bright red. The bell rang and Harry gave a last wrathful scream before galloping up the stairs and slamming his bedroom door shut. His mother groaned and patted her slightly bulging stomach tenderly, before stepping to the front hall to open the door. It was Sirius.

“How is your obedient and absolutely delightful son who takes so after you, Lily?” Sirius beamed, bearing a beautiful bouquet.

Lily took the flowers with a smile and headed to the drawing room, Sirius following her. “He wants a miniature Quidditch pitch,” she explained, placing them in a very pretty vase. She stepped back to admire the effect the golden roses made in the white marble vase as Sirius sank onto a sofa. “Price – a mere two hundred Galleons, according to him.”

"You can get it as a birthday gift for him," Sirius suggested. "His birthday is on the thirtieth, after all."

"We were thinking of getting him something more sensible," Lily said slowly. "A book perhaps. Or one of those new puzzles that just came out. Not something to do with Quidditch."

"How did you coerce James into buying the boy something not related to Quidditch for his seventh birthday?" Sirius asked, looking positively indignant. "The very thought of Harry Potter not knowing anything about his upbringing, about the impressive lineage of Quidditch maniacs, honorable men and women who'd gamble their lives and the lives of their loved ones on a match, who'd beggar themselves to penury to buy a good broom, who'd marry not for love or wealth or rank, but for a worthy, Quidditchy ancestry to bequeath their children!"

"And what I am supposed to think of that last line?" Lily laughed. "I'm anything but Quidditchy! I hate broomsticks; I have a fear of heights!"

"The exception proves the rule," Sirius said, waving a hand dismissively. "How's the baby coming on?"

"Quite docile," Lily smiled, patting her stomach. "Rose was a fighter, even in the second month, and Harry was quiet at the beginning, but he gave me quite a time near the end!"

"They've got a lot of fight in them," Sirius said warmly. "Rose doesn't let anyone walk over her, and Harry might be mousy, bless him, but you wouldn't find a fiercer boy when his blood's up."

"I wish his blood wouldn't be up," Lily said sharply. "He's getting too violent. He split Liam Turner's lip because Liam hid one of his toys, and Mrs. Benteen called to tell me she doesn't like the names Harry calls her daughter Susie. You encourage him."

"Like mother, like son," Sirius smiled innocently.

"Does that prove true in all cases?" Lily asked quietly. "Tell me, Sirius, does it prove true in yours?"

Sirius turned his head away for a moment. "I hope not." He chuckled softly, as if something amused him. "Actually, it's just that, you've hit upon a funny coincidence, it's because of that that I came to speak to you, now." He paused dramatically, then launched into the tale of Andromeda's visit and finally finished with a breathless, "May it take Rose with me please?"

"Sorry?" Lily said, looking confused at the end.

"May I," Sirius looked oddly like Rose before she made a request. First she begged. Then she used all her charm. Finally, she began crying or screaming, depending on the mood she was in. She'd got those tactics from Sirius, and Harry seemed to be on the high road to following them both. "May I, please-please-please, take Rose with me, please-please-please?"

Lily had to laugh at the number of please-s in his sentence. "Really, why?"

"May I?" Sirius made sad puppy-dog eyes.

Lily turned sober. "May I, ask why? Sirius, Rose is far too young for this sort of thing. She's only eleven and for her to see a funeral and, well, I'll be blunt, a funeral like your mother's..." She frowned. "You do understand what I'm trying to say, don't you?"

"Loud and clear," Sirius said, getting up and pacing restlessly around the drawing room. "You don't want her contaminated from such close-contact with Purebloods of *that* sort. Well, she's in Slytherin – she can't get any closer to them than that."

"You really are prejudiced against Slytherin."

"Sorry, I'm just speaking from experience. All Slytherins are dark, dangerous, and eeeeeevil."

"You sound like Rose," Lily chuckled.

"So, can she go?" Sirius turned to her beseechingly.

“But why?” Lily asked. “Why does she have to go? I can’t think of a reason to bar her, but I just feel that...”

“It’d be educational,” Sirius insisted. “And she’ll have fun exploring the house, even though it’s the darkest house in Great Britain it’s massive fun to explore. And...and, I need her. For moral support.”

“Andromeda is going,” Lily reminded him gravely. “So is Dora.”

“Dromeda hates me,” Sirius said frankly. “And don’t bother telling me that’s not true, she might not hate me, but she doesn’t like me much either. I know I’m going to smash something over their smug faces or, or...well, do something I’ll regret. But I won’t, I know I won’t, if Rose is around. I can’t kill anyone in front of a little girl, you see?”

“I do see,” Lily said seriously. “But I still don’t think that...”

“I’ll take excellent care of her!” Sirius half-cried. “I babysat her before her neck was strong enough for anyone to carry her before holding her head in place! The second word she said was Paddy! I flew with her before she could toddle around the house!”

“I know,” Lily sighed. “I’m not worried about that. I’m just, well, overprotective of her – you know how mothers are, maybe not from your own experience, but from seeing others perhaps – and I don’t want her scared in that old house.”

“I’ll clear up the skeletal remains of Muggles before I let her in,” Sirius grinned. “And the pickled fingers in the parlor, too.”

“Ha ha,” Lily laughed dryly. “I wonder why you’re going in the first place, actually.”

“So do I,” Sirius said gloomily, staring blankly out of the window. “Believe me, so do I.”

“I’ll ask her,” Lily said abruptly. “I’ll write to her and ask her if she wants to go – no, don’t try to influence her – and if she does, well...”

“She will! I know she will!” Sirius said firmly, bounding joyfully over to her. “Thank you!”

“I regret this already,” Lily said, but she chuckled. “Be a good boy now and run and tell Harry he may have his mini Quidditch pitch for his birthday.”

## ***Tying up Loose Ends***

*"Why be difficult, when with just a little bit of effort, you can be impossible?"*

- Anonymous

Neville clambered up the stairs to the boys' dormitories, feeling a guilty pleasure in whispering the worst swear-words he'd ever heard to himself. Rose had the most magnificent way of putting her foot in her mouth. She had an innate, almost uncanny, ability to do the most inappropriate thing at the most inappropriate time and the nerve and self-confidence to serenely act as if she was right – after she'd finished deconstructing the universe – and the rest of the world was just plain wrong. While he couldn't help but admire that – from an impartial view-point – it did have a way of making things very uncomfortable for the people who had to finish re-building the universe, mainly himself and Ron.

He knocked gently on the door to the first-year boys' dormitory and was welcomed in by an inauspicious grunt. Draco was sitting cross-legged on his bed, leafing through an album. He was very pale, but there was a hard set to his jaw that Neville knew would take some time to soften. Rose was brilliant when it came to making people mad, sometimes.

Neville crossed over to his own bed, and sat down, swinging his legs and looking at Draco. The other boy didn't even glance at him, but his movements were jerky and quick, as if he didn't like the attention he was receiving from Neville. A few minutes ticked away before Neville said cautiously, his tone studiously casual, "She can be very immature at times."

Draco turned a page of the album viciously.

"She doesn't think before she speaks," Neville hummed. "She's just a child, really, not at all sensible. She doesn't understand how stupid and hurtful she can be – but her heart's in the right place." Privately, Neville doubted whether Rose's heart was in the right place concerning Draco – she had been out for his blood a few moments ago, and probably still was, his lecture notwithstanding.

Draco diligently ignored him.

“She’s only that rude to people she really likes or really dislikes,” Neville rambled on. “She’s just a baby, can’t control her temper at all, and that bit of gossip about – not that I believe a word of it of course – Mrs. Lestranger upset her so much that she had to vent her anger out on something. Of course, it was childish and nasty of her, but the right thing to do – the gentlemanly, chivalrous, *adult* thing – would be to let her humbly apologize and graciously forgive her. Of course, that’s only my opinion.”

Silence greeted this.

“Just a little girl, really,” Neville said softly. “She’d be crushed if you didn’t take it in the right spirit, and she’s not so well now – something upset her yesterday, and I still don’t know what, I really don’t know if she’s quite fit enough to understand the consequences of her actions. An intelligent and mature friend would forgive and forget.” Neville sincerely hoped that Draco would never repeat their conversation to Rose – she’d have his head for sure for calling her immature and a little girl.

Draco closed his album with a snap and slammed it viciously onto the thickly carpeted floor to produce a muffled thud. “She needs to grow up – does she think she’ll remain a child forever?”

*She hardly thinks she’s a child now.* “She’s quite weak now,” Neville lied blithely. Rose was never weak. “But if you could help her, associate with her, she’d benefit immensely from your presence.”

“*Noblesse oblige*,” Draco muttered under his breath. “She must apologize for her boorish conduct. That outburst – well, only someone of my breeding would tolerate it without calling her out.”

*I bet she’d best you in a duel – even if you are better at Transfiguration, she’s far better at DADA.* Neville nodded sorrowfully. “She’s miserable enough already about how she acted. It wouldn’t do to leave her like that.”

“No,” Draco drew out the word. “I suppose it wouldn’t – that would be vulgar of me. I must play my part with fortitude and accept her timid



apologies and be gracious and pleasant, much as I hate to be.” He appeared to relish the thought of Rose apologizing to him.

“Mmm,” Neville nodded gravely. “Before we go down and comfort her though – I have some important news.” He drew a deep breath. “I found out what’s behind the three-headed dog. It’s the Philosopher’s Stone.” He waited for the effect his bomb would have – and wasn’t disappointed.

On cue, Draco toppled out of his bed and onto the floor near his album. “What-when-where-how-why?”

Neville smiled magnanimously. “Come here – I’ll tell you the whole story.” Draco clambered onto his bed, looking very interested. His gray eyes, which had been so cold a few minutes ago, were now alive with excitement.

“It’s because of Quirrell, really,” Neville began. “Our tea-parties, like Rose says, they’re not really tea-parties. We discuss things – books, theories, concepts, ideas, people and their motivations, things like that. It’s fascinating. And Quirrell has been lending me books.”

*“Il lure di mistero, bellezza dell'oscurità!”* Draco squeaked excitedly. “That Italian-ish book you were reading on the day Rose got those first twenty-five Galleons from her Uncle Padfoot – whoever that is! And...and *Dross and Gloss, Nicolas Flamel: Secrets Revealed* – that book Rose was reading the day of the first Quidditch match – she got it from you!”

“And he kind-of led me on to thinking about things and, well, concepts too, you know – money, power, politics, group dynamics...am I confusing you?”

“Not really,” Draco said, but his befuddled expression gave him away. To cover it up though, he hastily puffed out his chest and said, “Father and I discuss the role of money in politics.”

“It’s fascinating,” Neville repeated, eyes shining. “About how you can influence a crowd with just a few words and your passion and conviction, and get them to do things for you, and how this is all related to the perception of power, which is just-”

“The Philosopher’s Stone?” Draco interrupted, looking bored.

“*Dross and Gloss* really helped me. And Quirrell dropped a few broad hints too. And well, remember how I borrowed your Transfiguration book that day for the notes you scribble in the margins? Well, you’d stuffed that paper Rose and you were working on – what’s behind the three-headed dog – and I read it and thought some more.

And then, Rose’s Uncle Padfoot is an Unspeakable and I wrote to him for more details about the Gringotts Incident on July 31st – they’re still working on finding the culprit – and he sowed a few broad hints too – he always does, he can’t keep things to himself, and he thought it’d be fun for me to hear about, he said. And I put everything together and read *Dross and Gloss* once again and the day before yesterday...I guessed.”

“It’s just a guess?”

“I’d wager my owl on it,” Neville said seriously. “And I’m going to ask Quirrell too. His face will give him away if I’m right – even though he’ll say no, of course not. And – what?”

Draco’s eyes were shining with admiration. He shook his head and smiled wryly but he couldn’t keep his thoughts to himself. “You really have a lot of brains, Neville Longbottom. Even we – Rose and I – couldn’t figure out what it was and we worked long enough on it.”

“That’s not me,” Neville insisted, blushing. He didn’t know why he was denying it, but he didn’t feel comfortable receiving Draco’s admiration. Having people admire him for something he wasn’t responsible for – his scar and being the Boy who Lived – was more satisfying – though he didn’t know why – than having people admire him for something he’d managed by himself. “I had loads of help and you and Rose would have found out if you’d given it a bit more thought.”

Draco shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“Certainly,” Neville said firmly. “Now, let’s go down, shall we, and make up with Rose?”

Draco sighed with the air of a martyr and marched down, Neville trailing behind, to 'graciously' receive Rose's sulky apology and explain the mystery to her.

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Laughing hysterically, Rose threw herself full-length onto a settee in the Common Room. Draco and Neville trooped in after her, Draco's jaw set firmly as if he was trying not to giggle – Draco never laughed, he always giggled like a girl – and Neville hiccupping with hilarity.

"It wasn't funny at all," Tracey said severely, from behind Neville. She frowned down at Rose as if disappointed at her for laughing. "Pansy looked *dreadful* – poor dear; I'm going to make a card for her. It's perfectly nasty of you to laugh so!"

At this, Rose shrieked harder than ever. Between coughs of laughter she managed to splutter out, "Pansy always looks dreadful! And she got what she deserved for messing with Patil – Smith's sweet on that girl, and Pansy ought to have known and taken care."

"He's a horrible boy," Tracey hissed, stomping up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. "And I think you're horrible for siding with him!"

"I didn't!" Rose squawked in protest, but she couldn't restrain another giggle. Tracey turned around and made a face at her before marching up the stairs.

Potions had been their last class that day. Rose had been sitting squashed between Draco and Neville as usual, humming off-key to Draco's annoyance, – he could carry off any tune beautifully and therefore was quite aghast when faced with her talent for humming anything and everything off-tune – and trying to make sense of the instructions on the blackboard. Snape had been prowling through the classroom like an over-sized bat, distributing insults and taking off points generously, gagging at the noxious odors and fumes that wafted up from various cauldrons, and making appropriately nasty comments.

Pansy had been laughing quietly to herself and flaunting the pretty bracelet that adorned her delicate wrist in Parvati Patil's direction.

They'd gotten into a bitter cat-fight two days ago, trading insults and slaps generously – and had both been suitably awarded by detention – over some little trifle, and were now mortal enemies. From their exchange, Rose had gathered that they'd been brought up together – a belief later confirmed by Draco who'd told her that they'd 'all' grown up together. By 'all', Rose supposed that he meant the Patil girls, Pansy, himself, Nott, Zabini, and Daphne. They all had an impeccable lineage in common.

Parvati looked like she was about to cry over her atrocious potion whilst Pansy and Millicent were giggling over her. Smith, who made no attempt to do well in Potions, had been looking at her and at Pansy with a murderous expression on his face – Parvati was even prettier than her twin, and it was no wonder that Smith had a crush on her. Rose had been watching with interest, her own potion finished and graded, for she loved the outraged expression on his face. He'd waited while Snape was breathing down Granger's neck, searching desperately for some flaw in her marvelous potion, before ducking down as if to tie a shoelace and then rolling a little, round parcel wrapped in brown paper towards Pansy.

Then he'd gotten up innocently, but his eyes had met Rose's. He winked at her and then blandly turned to his cauldron, wrinkling his nose in disgust at the smell it emitted. The explosion had occurred within a few seconds. Pansy was presently in the Hospital Wing, her face and neck covered with fast-growing, little, purple toadstools and bright orange pustules – Rose guessed that the bomb was a product from Zonko's, she recognized the trademark toadstools that Zonko favored in his explosions.

Smith been hidden from Snape's view by the Gryffindors' feet, so technically, Snape could not accuse him – but there was no doubt about who the culprit was, even for those people who hadn't been spying on him, like Rose. He was the nastiest little toe-rag ever, according to all the Slytherins, audacious, impertinent, ever so boorishly *Gryffindor*, stupid, unwilling to learn and mature and give up foolish, childish pranks, utterly careless of his reputation. There was nothing the little snot wasn't capable of.

Of course, all the Slytherins had roared with laughter – all except loyal Millicent and tender-hearted Tracey. Pansy truly did look hideous. But they hated Smith even more than before, for all the amusement they afforded from his joke, and they wouldn't hesitate to clobber him, given the chance. Rose was pretty sure Zabini was already preparing a battle plan and trying to enlist Crabbe and Goyle into attacking Smith – a not-so-difficult feat, considering how fond they were of attacking anybody and everybody.

Rose knew that she ought to feel indignant at Smith – it really had been a childish, mean thing to do and it wasn't like Pansy had offended *him*, just a girl he had a crush on – but she couldn't. It was too funny and in an odd way it reminded her of Uncle Padfoot – that was the sort of thing he would do. She still thought he was a prat, but now he was an interesting prat.

“So, what was in that letter?” Neville suddenly demanded, after he'd finished rolling around on the floor. Draco was sitting elegantly on an arm-chair, his legs neatly crossed at the ankle. Rose wondered whether he'd ever had Etiquette Lessons – he always sat so ladylike.

“What letter?” Rose asked naively.

Neville looked impatient at her forgetfulness. “The letter you got at breakfast,” he said slowly. “The one your mother's owl delivered and we were late for Transfiguration, so you couldn't read it. That one – don't tell me you've forgotten it.”

“Short term memory,” Draco murmured.

Rose frowned at him and rummaged in her pocket for the letter. Why, oh why, was she stuck with that prat? He was even more of a prat than Harry – and that was saying something.

*Dear Rose,*

*How's school going? Broken any bones in Quidditch yet? Do you like the Fairy Kiss Cakes I made for you last time? I got the recipe from old Miss Bagshot – I doubt whether it's been used since the last century! Thirty-two eggs for a little cake...well, they must have been*

*quite rich in those days and as long as it tastes good, I suppose I can spare some money for it.*

*Daddy's too busy to write now – but he sends his love. Still plenty of work on the Gringotts Incident, tiresome paperwork now, especially since they've gotten a new lead. Never become an Auror, dear; it's not as exciting as it looks like. Your father's practically buried behind his desk; he sneaks in at eleven at night, like a thief, into his own house and is gone before seven. Has a bite of something warm, a little nap, and then off he is again!*

*Harry's becoming terribly unmanageable, I wish I had you to help me with him. We're getting him a mini-Quidditch pitch for his seventh birthday – don't forget to send a card, it means a lot to him – and you won't believe the price! One hundred and fifty Galleons! Now don't tell me that we're being too extravagant on him – my conscience already tells me that – and that we never spent as much money on you. We spend a pretty penny on you too, darling, and don't you forget that.*

*Uncle Padfoot visited us on Sunday – imagine, your father's too busy to even spend more than an hour or two at home on Sunday! He had some news, which I suppose I'd count bad if it was anyone else, but which, in his case, might almost be considered good. His mother is terribly ill, there's no hope that she'll survive beyond New Year. He intends to visit her funeral, though he hasn't been in contact with her for nearly twenty years, as you well know, for reasons only he knows. Well, here's the part where we both almost came to an argument over.*

*He wants to take you to the funeral – when it happens – with him. I really don't understand the necessity of this, but I gave him my word I'd ask you. He seems quite desperate to take you – apparently, he believes he'll kill someone without your presence to keep his temper in check – and I can't find any reason, yet, why you shouldn't go. Of course, it's up to you. You're old enough to take some of your own decisions – no, that doesn't apply to squandering money as recklessly as Harry, I have enough trouble controlling him without you doing your bit – and I'm not going to interfere with your choice. Send me an answer as soon as possible.*

*With Love,*

## *Mum*

Rose's hands were trembling and her face was very pale as she numbly held the letter, long after finishing it. Absorbed as he was in a heated argument about whether the Tutshill Tornados were winning the Quidditch League by a combination of blackmail, illegal broom-tampering, and torture, a half-glance at Rose's ashen face was enough to stop him mid-sentence in his volatile argument with Draco.

"Bad news?" he asked tentatively.

Rose put down the letter and stared blankly at him, opening and closing her mouth rapidly.

"Rose, what is it?" Neville asked, now very concerned. He scuttled over to her settee and tried to wrest the letter from her cold fingers. "C'mere, give it to me..." At once, her fingers tightened on the letter and impatiently, she pushed him off. "How old do you think you are?" she snapped.

"Older than you by one day, at least," he said, looking a little hurt. "I was just trying to help, but if you don't want..."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she half-wailed, looking suddenly panic-stricken. "It's just that – oh nothing, it's nothing."

"Has anything..."

"Oh, why can't you leave me in *peace*?" she sobbed, looking at him with wrathful eyes. "You're always being so horrid, so stupid, I can't even concentrate!"

Now, Draco was looking confused, and Neville seemed to be alternating between whether to feel offended, amused, or bewildered. They both looked a little fearful for her sanity. With a final disgusted sniff of "*Boys!*" Rose, clutching her letter desperately rushed up the staircase to the girls' dormitories. She flung herself furiously on her own bed as Tracey, composing a singing get-well card for Pansy, looked on in incomprehension. Her mind was working at a ferocious rate.

*I don't want to go, I know I'll do something that'll give me up and then everyone'll know and, sweet Morgana, I'll kill myself of shame! What will they do if they find out?* She shivered in horror of the thought.

*But then if I don't go – they'll start to wonder and be suspicious and they might actually come to that conclusion! They'd think it normal for me to go with Uncle Padfoot anywhere and they'd know it's unnatural of me not to follow him to such an interesting event and then they'll find out why I don't want to go...*

*But I can't go, I can't, I can't, I want to stay back at Hogwarts so that I don't have to face them with that horrible secret – I thought I'd put it behind me, oh, why does it have to follow me? To go and most likely betray myself or not to go and assuredly betray myself – that is the question.*

*Why do I have to make these decisions? I hate that stupid Mirror, it's not my fault about it, and now look where it's led me to. I'm never, ever going to spy on Ron and Smith again. Never, ever, ever!*

Rose pulled her face, now wet with tears, off her pillow. She rummaged for a clean sheet of parchment, one without Neville's doodles all over it and Draco's side-notes on Transfiguration. She'd have to go; there was no help for it.



## ***Christmas at Grimmauld Place and Godric's Hallow***

*"Harry, I think it's Christmas Eve!" said Hermione*

### **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, British Edition, Pg 265**

Draco Malfoy let out a prodigious yawn and stretched out his small body on the antique, Victorian chaise lounge in the White-and-Gold Parlor of his family mansion. From across the room, his grandfather's ninth wife frowned disapprovingly at him.

"Am I to presume the uncouth society of Hogwarts have deprived of your manners, young man? Sit straight and do try not to look more of a Hippogriff than you already are!" Ursa Malfoy bit out. "Narcissa, darling," she called out sweetly, as her stepson's wife rustled into the parlor. "It troubles me not a little that you consider the deportment of the last Malfoy heir of such small importance – my dear, just look at his posture!"

Narcissa smiled gently and was about to coo something appropriately conciliating to both parties involved – her father-in-law's irate, eighteen-year-old bride and her defiant son – when her sister Bellatrix's sharp voice cut out. "At least he has good blood to fall back upon," she sneered, glowering at Ursa. "The blood of the Blacks, Madam, is still considered superior to that of the –" her mouth twisted in scorn. "The *Crabbes*. I do consider it a pity Draco must endure the taint of your presence – tell me, my dear girl, how many of your nieces have you had to marry off to half-bloods to keep from sinking into penury?"

Ursa looked furious. Abraxas Malfoy was in the habit of marrying young witches, most of them barely of-age, every few years, and then, when they lost their nubility, of disposing of them in the same way as did the present Mrs. Zabini, who'd been married seven times. His only child was Lucius, whom he doted upon. Now, at the ripe age of eighty-nine, it was doubtful that he expected any more heirs. He certainly didn't need any more money and he didn't need a wife who'd take care of his social relations for him – he had his daughter-in-law for that – so it was rather a bit of a mystery to most why he kept on marrying.

"It's almost time," Narcissa murmured into the silence, looking very pale. "Mother and Aunt Walburga will be expecting us at Grimmauld Place." Other women, common Mudbloods and such, turned red. Narcissa turned pale. Now, she was as pale as the chaise lounge Draco was relaxing on – and by that sign he knew she was furious. Accordingly, he hopped off and hurried to her, ducking under the wrathful glares Bellatrix and Ursa were shooting each other.

"May I take your arm, my lady?" he asked his aunt politely, hoping it would distract her. He bowed like a medieval courtier to a queen and was rewarded by a low, husky chuckle.

"You're a sly, little boy, trying to get me to shake off that bloodhound of a grandmother of yours," Bellatrix whispered down to Draco. Narcissa called for a house-elf to tell Master Lucius and Master Rodolphus to hurry down and another house-elf prepared the fire for all of them to Floo over to Grimmauld Place.

"Pray send my compliments to Druella and enquire of her how she managed to raise such vulgarly-brought-up daughters – it's not only that wretched Andromeda either, both of you are rotten to the core as well!" Ursa's high voice trilled, as Bellatrix was about to step into the fire. Bellatrix's ears quivered in rage – they always quivered when she was angry – but she did not turn around. "There's no need to send any message to Walburga though!" Ursa cackled. "She's on her deathbed as it is, won't be long now before –"

Bellatrix whirled around, bluish-grey eyes flashing in fury, wand raised, ready to strike. Ursa knew where to strike, and now she smiled sweetly up at Bellatrix from her position on a settee.

Draco distinctly heard his mother hiss, "Sweet Morgana – that..." but she managed to restrain herself before uttering any filthy invectives against Ursa Malfoy. His mother's eyes locked with his and he knew what to do – get Aunt Bella out of the mansion and into Grimmauld Place before Ursa Malfoy died in torment. He grabbed her arm roughly and dragged her into the fireplace, his mother striding across the parlor to the fireplace and talking in a low and furious voice to Aunt Bella.

“12 Grimmauld Place!” Aunt Bella called out – voice higher than usual –, and he tumbled into the massive parlor of the house, onto the 15th century Turkish rug stationed in front of the fireplace.

“You are late by three minutes,” a placid voice said and Draco picked himself up. His grandmother Druella was embroidering quite serenely on a couch. She looked beautiful as usual, her long, silvery-blond hair – Veela hair, he’d used to call it when he was little, she was like a Veela to him then and now too, so beautiful and graceful and calm, even more than Mother – piled up in an elegant braid that spanned her forehead and coiled on top of her head, the folds of her magnificent violet silk gown arranged with almost geometrical precision around her, lily-white fingers working quietly and delicately on her pretty embroidery, her jewels sparkling with a quiet elegance in the candle-light.

She was a direct contrast to the figure bundled up in an armchair opposite her. It was Great-Aunt Walburga. Great Wail, as he’d nicknamed her when he was small, always looked horrible, but now – it might have been because of the charming figure her sister-in-law made, opposite her, or a trick of the candlelight, or perhaps because she was going to die so soon – she looked loathsome. Her skin was yellow and mottled like one of Grandfather Abraxas’s ancient, worm-infested tomes, her teeth few and black like soot and her eyes were like crow’s eyes – only bluish-grey like every Black’s, like Mother and Aunt Bella – sharp and observant, half-concealed in folds of skin.

Great Wail let out a cackle of laughter when she saw her favorite niece and tried to stretch out her fat arms. Bellatrix swished over to her instantly and let herself be embraced. The two held on tight as Druella beckoned her only grandson to her. Presently, the others, Mother, Father, and Uncle Rodolphus arrived, and later Grandfather Abraxas – without Ursa who’d opted to sulk in the mansion and torment house-elves. It was to be a quiet family Christmas dinner, most likely Great Wail’s last.

“You’ve grown into a fine young man,” Druella said, smiling faintly, as bowing house-elves arrived with wine, – and for Draco, pumpkin juice – and patting Draco on the hand. “Four feet, eleven inches, I think?”

“Five feet, one inch,” Draco lied. He was just a hair’s breadth over five feet and therefore considered himself five feet, one inch.

“Quite manly,” Druella said with a straight face, as Grandfather Abraxas roared with laughter. “I have no doubt that one day you’ll be as handsome as them.” And she swept a slim, white hand towards the row of portraits that adorned the walls. Draco devoutly hoped it wouldn’t come to that – except for Phineas Nigellus Black, all the other Blacks were...unappetizing to look at, to put it mildly. Most of them were covered with horrible birthmarks and pox-marks or had terrible noses – Draco prided himself on his gorgeous nose. And, all of them looked more than capable of murder. Unfortunately, that did not add to their attractiveness appeal.

Aunt Bella and Great Wail were sitting together, talking in low voices. Aunt Bella looked very unhappy and even the folds around Great Wail’s tiny eyes were harder, while her jaw muscles stood out tightly against her puffy skin. Draco hoped he’d never survive to be over a hundred – the result wasn’t pretty.

Suddenly, Great Wail said firmly and very loudly, “Yes, Bella, I am quite well, quite strong enough for this. Now, don’t be a fool and help me up, for there isn’t much time left me.”

Druella shook her head almost imperceptibly – Draco wouldn’t have thought she’d shaken her head if her shoulder-length, diamond chandelier earrings had not begun to swing suddenly.

“I’m fit – perfectly fine!” Great Wail said querulously, making a move to rise. “Do get up some gumption, girl, and –”

Druella rustled over to her. Swiftly putting her arms around her sister-in-law’s waist, she helped her up, the effort of lifting the huge woman making her grow pale. Bellatrix helped, and then Great Wail shook off her sister-in-law impatiently. “Quite well, quite well!” she said indignantly. “Don’t be a ninny there, Abraxas, sit down – there’s no need to be gentlemanly now! Come, my girl – the little parlor.”

And, clutching her niece’s arm tightly, she hobbled away from the large parlor as her guests stared after her bemusedly. Druella was very pale and there was a knowing look in her eyes as she settled

down beside Draco. "Now tell me," she said with perfect composure, turning to her grandson, as if nothing at all had happened to interrupt their conversation. "What subject are you fondest of, my dear." Nothing could ever ruffle Druella Rosier Black.

Five minutes passed by, and then Aunt Bella entered the parlor alone. A sudden hush fell upon the room. Draco remembered her face long after that day, white as a stone, blank, emotionless. But her eyes were the eyes that haunted him, the eyes of a woman who'd lost something inexpressibly dear, something that had bound her to another life and with whose loss the old life had disappeared as well, without a trace.

"She is dead," Aunt Bella said, and her words, spoken very softly, very quietly, fell echoing, crashing into the quiet room. Draco shivered involuntarily. He was sharing a house with a corpse. The thought gave him a sick thrill; Death was so near.

Druella got up at once and her favorite daughter, Narcissa, followed her out of the room. Abraxas sat still, looking very dazed, while Rodolphus shouted for the house-elves.

"You won't care to stay now?" Lucius said quickly to his sister-in-law, following his wife. Bellatrix shook her head, looking down. Something – could it be a tear? – glittered on her pale cheek. "Take Draco home," he said urgently, "No – don't protest, Draco. Death is not a sight for children. Go, be a good boy."

Draco followed his Aunt Bella into the fireplace and noticed with shock that her hand shook as she grasped his. It was all so strange. But then a thought occurred to him, it wasn't so strange at all. Mother had once mentioned that Aunt Bella was always Great Wail's pet, that they were both similar – both crazy to the core, as Mother had laughingly phrased it. Aunt Bella was probably the only person in the world sad to see Great Wail die.

"Go tell that woman," Aunt Bella said curtly when they were in the mansion. Draco knew she meant Ursa. "I can't – and then go to bed. Run now, child, and let me have my tears in peace." She was fingering a necklace. *But she wasn't wearing a necklace when we went!* Draco thought bewildered.

“Didn’t you hear me? Go!” Aunt Bella spat out with enough venom to send Draco running. She sank into an armchair, burying her head in her knees, which she’d drawn up in a most inelegant manner, shoulders shaking with silent sobs. Draco wondered about the necklace – Great Wail must have given it to her just before she died. He tried to remember how the necklace had looked like – old-looking, gold chain, but Aunt Bella had tucked the locket inside her dress, so he hadn’t seen it. *Sure must be worth a lot for Great Wail to give it to her at the last moment*, he thought as he raced up to Ursa Malfoy’s apartments.

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“Are you sure you don’t want to come down?” Daddy called from downstairs.

“No – I still feel icky!” Rose shouted. She was lying on her bed on Christmas night, skipping dinner because she couldn’t bear to spend another moment in Uncle Padfoot’s company. She felt very sorry for herself, and turned to the gift Mum had gotten her. A book of riddles. How very Mum-esque – it was so *educational*. Even Neville had gotten one.

There was nothing to do now, locked up in her room, stomach growling, feeling very sorry for herself, and in constant dread should a slip of tongue or manner betray her secret. *I bet this is how they felt when You-Know-Who was around, always scared*, she thought, with a sudden flash of knowledge. *And when they weren’t actively fighting against him, I bet they were bored too.*

Bored. That was how she felt too. She’d spent the holidays ducking and dodging to avoid Uncle Padfoot and locking herself up in her room. She knew her behavior worried and disturbed her parents – they’d tried to coax an explanation out of her and it had taken some skill and lots of crying to keep them from guessing – and amused Harry no end – he got her portion of dessert. Uncle Padfoot was quiet about the matter, but he was watching her with sharp eyes, she could tell. He acted as if everything was the same, but she knew he was searching for what was wrong. When he found it, he’d try to help her, but he would do anything in his power to make sure she didn’t know

he was concerned. That was just his way – and a good way it was too. It might even have worked if Rose didn't know all his ways – she'd spent eleven years growing up alongside him.

Everything she'd got for Christmas was Quidditch-related, so she couldn't amuse herself with her gifts. The only thing left to her was the stupid riddle-book. Idly, she turned the pages, reading a riddle, and checking out the answer instantly. She wasn't good with riddles – Ron was – and she always checked the answers, not bothering to try to solve them.

*I                  lurk                  in                  the                  darkness.  
I'm              a              cause              of              great              fright.  
If              your              life's              without              sorrow,  
then I'm out of sight.*

*Ans: Thestral*

Boring. She flipped a few pages, to the very end, where the hardest riddles lay. They were all pretty long. On the last page was a picture of seven differently shaped bottles standing in a line, and a riddle underneath it.

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,*

*Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,*

*One among us seven will let you move ahead,*

*Another will transport the drinker back instead...*

*...*

*...Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.*

*Ans: The smallest bottle would permit you to proceed ahead.*

Rose wondered what kind of person wrote riddles for a living. The author was H.B. Prince. Mad chap. Was Neville messing around with the riddles? Joy to him, then! They were laughing and eating downstairs – Harry was probably helping himself to her dessert. She

walked over to her window, very hungry, and looked down. It was a full moon night and the lane, illuminated by street-lamps and moonlight, was very bright. Suddenly, a figure bloomed out of the darkness, a figure with long, electric-blue hair, who marched purposefully up to the house. *Tonks?* Rose thought, confused, glancing intently down at the pale, heart-shaped face. *What's she...?*

She tiptoed to her door and opened it an inch, listening carefully. Tonks knocked impatiently and Harry pattered to the door, Mum following him. A surprised shriek of greeting, Daddy and Uncle Padfoot hurrying to the door, the low rise and fall of voices, a soft cry of disbelief, voices murmuring again, and then a faint *pop* signaled that Tonks had Disapparated.

"If you're listening," Uncle Padfoot shouted, his voice carrying up to her, "My mother's dead." Rose wondered how he'd known she was listening; there was no way he could have seen her peeking out of the door. And then, she remembered with a sick jolt, his mother's death meant that she would have to go to the funeral – with Uncle Padfoot. *Sweet Morgana.*



## ***The Funeral***

*"How would you like to die?"*

*"I don't want to die, thank you."*

*"You don't have a spark of melodrama in you."*

*"And you have a raging bonfire of it, don't you?"*

### **Dorea Black and Druella Rosier**

"Will you *please* stop fidgeting? It won't take more than a minute if you'll just be still," Mum said, her wand clamped between her teeth and her nose screwed up in concentration.

"This is an *icky* dress," Rose protested, squirming in discomfort and causing Mum to let out a mild, muffled oath.

"It's velvet," Mum said crossly.

"It's still icky," Rose retorted. "Velvet robes and embroidered satin bed-sheets are for vampires, in any case."

"Vampires are seldom rich enough to afford bed-sheets, let alone embroidered satin ones," Daddy yawned out. "Do you ever turn the leaves of your History textbook, by the way?"

"Not if I can help it," Rose said, fidgeting. It was seven o'clock in the morning, December 27th, and Uncle Padfoot would arrive in ten minutes to take her and Floo down to Tonks' house, where Tonks' grandmother, Mrs Black, would escort them and Mrs Tonks and Tonks to 12 Grimmauld Place, where the funeral would be held. Right now, Mum was Charming one of her own gowns to fit Rose, as Rose didn't have any clothes of her own 'suitable for a funeral'.

"There," Mum said finally, leaning back on her feet and patting her round stomach. She looked satisfied. "You look lovely."

"You look stupid," Harry announced. "You look like a vampire."

“Atleast I don’t look like a badger,” Rose retorted, frowning at him. “Bet you’re jealous you can’t go. Six-year-old baby.”

Harry made a face at her. He was a bit jealous – why did Uncle Padfoot always take Rose everywhere and not him? It wasn’t fair. He was six and plenty old enough to go to a funeral.

“Children don’t quarrel,” Mum said firmly, sounding like a kindergarten teacher. “What do you think, James?”

There was a very odd look on Daddy’s face as he surveyed her. Part surprise, part uncertainty, part sadness, the look of a man who’d just lost something. But his face stretched into a smile after a moment and he spread out his arms for Rose to climb in. “You look so grown-up,” he said softly. “You’re such a big girl, now – where’s my little Rosalie gone?”

Rose laughed nervously, surveying herself in a mirror. A pale, thin face with vivid emerald-green eyes stared back, short, black hair – tidy for once – covering her forehead and ears, and framing her sharp jaw. Her hair was growing longer – it was now chin-length as opposed to barely ear-length in July. It made her look better.

Mum’s gown, modified for her, was as black as her Hogwarts uniform, though far more elegant. The collar was high, grazing the edge of her chin, and stiff, though its scratchy linen material was enchanted to look like lace. The gown flowed gracefully down, with a trailing skirt and long, hanging sleeves. It made her look taller and the whole *air* of the gown made her look older than her eleven years.

“It’s magical,” Rose whispered in awe, “Even if it is icky.”

“It’s full of good secrets and blessings and love,” Daddy said, looking a little absent-minded. “It’s my mother’s, Dorea Black.”

“And it has a beautiful little history,” Mum said dreamily, while Harry looked questioningly at Rose. They both wondered why Mum and Daddy were looking so wistful and speaking so oddly. Many things had histories – jewels, bridal veils, books, flowers – but dresses did not fall into the category of things with histories. “It starts with –” she was about to begin the story when the doorbell rang. She smiled

faintly and hurried to the door as Rose and Harry began to shout questions at their Daddy, who was laughing helplessly as he went to prepare the fire for Rose and Sirius to Floo to the Tonks' house.

Uncle Padfoot strode in, debonair in black velvet and bearing a bouquet of delicate white roses. "The flower of funerals," he announced, waving the roses. "Dromeda told me to have some on hand. What's the commotion about, kids?"

Rose and Harry were both yelling at the top of their voices. "He won't tell us about Rose's dress!" Harry wailed. "It has a *history*, d'you know Uncle Padfoot?"

Uncle Padfoot looked at Rose and did a double-take. "You're letting her wear that?" he said, squinting in bewilderment. "I thought you meant to keep it as a relic, or something!"

"What do you mean?" Rose howled, forgetting her embarrassment around Uncle Padfoot in sight of this new mystery. "What's with this dress?"

"I just thought about letting her try it," Mum called out, voice rising over her children's, glancing at Rose. "Children, children, don't shout!"

"I'm going to cry if you don't tell me," Harry said firmly, sitting down cross-legged on the floor. "I'll cry and cry and cry until the whole house is flooded."

"They'll just siphon off all the extra water," Uncle Padfoot smiled. "If you're quiet, they might tell you." Rose immediately stopped screaming.

"But we don't have time for a story now," Uncle Padfoot said, grabbing Rose's hand and hurrying to the fire. "Aunt Druella is very particular about being late." He stepped into the fire and shouted clearly, "5 Hedgerow Lane." Only at the least moment, when they were already in the fire, did Rose's cheeks begin to burn at holding Uncle Padfoot's hand.

Rose tumbled out onto a pretty little rug in front of the fireplace, Uncle Padfoot stepping smartly behind her.

“Wotcher, Rose, Uncle Sirius,” Tonks yawned, looking sleepy. Rose knew that she never woke until noon, if she could help it. She was, in her own words, a night owl. She was lying full-length on a couch, a magazine in her hands, looking unusually solemn in her black gown. Her hair was black too, knotted into a bun at the nape of her neck for the occasion and she looked very prim and proper – unnaturally so, for eclectic Tonks.

Beside her sat a beautiful lady who Rose knew must be her grandmother. It surprised her for the lady looked nothing like a grandmother, she was so elegant and graceful and very, very beautiful – like a Veela, really. The lady was frowning at Tonks – as if she disapproved of her posture – but now that Sirius and Rose had entered, she turned to look at them. There was undisguised abhorrence and contempt in her lovely face as she looked at her nephew and acknowledged him with a cold nod. But disbelief and bewilderment flickered in her bright blue eyes as she glanced at Rose.

“Andromeda is in the kitchen with her husband,” the lady said coolly. “Run and call her, Nymphadora.” Tonks winced at the use of her full name and letting out a huge yawn, shuffled out of the room, muttering something about unlawful caffeine deprivation. Without a word, Uncle Padfoot trailed after her – clearly, he didn’t want to remain in a room with his aunt for too long. Rose was about to follow them, for though the un-grandmotherly lady looked interesting, she was a stranger.

“Come here, child,” the lady said, before Rose could take more than a few steps. “I don’t bite.”

“Yes’m,” Rose said, feeling very uncomfortable. The lady patted a spot on the couch and gingerly, Rose perched down.

“Who are you?” the lady asked.

“Rose Potter,” Rose said, trying not to squirm.

“Not James’s Potter’s daughter?” the lady said, looking pensive.

"I am," Rose said.

"Of course," the lady said absently. "Of course you would be. Gryffindor, I presume, child?"

"No," Rose said, still feeling very wrong-footed. "Slytherin."

The lady's eyes were very sharp now and she opened her mouth to speak, but the others had already arrived.

"You can come with me," Tonks yawned to Rose. "I need someone to keep me from falling asleep."

"*Inebriated*," the lady, her grandmother, murmured under her breath, stepping into the fire which her daughter had already prepared.

"12 Grimmauld Place," Tonks yawned, eyelashes batting rapidly over her tired eyes, clutching Rose as they entered the fire together. They Flooed into a bedroom, an antique, magnificent old bedroom where Tonks' grandmother already stood. Tonks literally fell into the bedroom and her grandmother was about to begin a line about deportment when Uncle Padfoot and Mrs Tonks arrived.

"Narcissa is downstairs with Lucius. They are receiving guests," Tonks' grandmother said flatly, as if she was reading out a role-call. "Their son and Rodolphus are out in the garden, attending to the smaller matters. Cassiopeia Greengrass and Andraste Lestrange are tending to Bellatrix – she is hardly in a fit state for the work at hand. I shall take you down and then I will have to leave and attend the girl myself. The ceremonies begin in fifteen minutes. Come, now."

"This used to be my room," Uncle Padfoot whispered to Rose. "Don't stop to stare, we have plenty of time to explore this old wreck later – we don't want to be late and upset that old baboon now."

"She's really pretty," Rose whispered up at him, shaking her hand out of his grip.

"A beautiful face does not always indicate a beautiful soul," Uncle Padfoot said softly. "Take my cousins for example. You've heard

about my dear cousin, Bellatrix haven't you? You'll see her today." He shuddered.

They went down the house, Rose pattering after Tonks who was trying desperately to stifle her yawns, Uncle Padfoot trailing behind her while Tonks' grandmother and Mrs Tonks marched in front, faces grim and determined. The house was full of murmurs, quiet in themselves but loud in their entirety, but Tonks' grandmother led them through what Rose was sure were secret passageways – they did seem to go through a great many doors concealed behind tapestries – and they met no one. Finally, they stepped out into a tiny, broom-cupboardish room, hardly large enough to accommodate all five of them. There was a little door and a littler pane of glass – Rose guessed that it was supposed to be a window, because she could see a patch of the garden from it – in the teeny-tiny room.

"Are you quite prepared?" Tonks' grandmother asked, turning solicitously to her daughter Andromeda and frostily to her nephew Sirius. They both nodded, both looking nervous in their own ways. Andromeda was very pale – the Black women always turned pale in times of emergency – and Sirius was frowning determinedly, trying not to show how tense he was. Tonks' grandmother threw open the door and sunlight filled the little broom-cupboardish room.

"I bet they've put an enchantment to keep the whole garden warm," Tonks yawned. "C'mon, Mum."

Andromeda clutched her daughter and mother very tightly and all three swept out into the garden. Sirius clung onto Rose's small hand with his large one and followed them. It wasn't a garden really, seeing as there were no flowers. It was more of an elegant lawn with a few large, sinister-looking trees scattered throughout, lurking darkly like hoary old enchanters in the sunshiny, formal lawn.

In the centre of the lawn was a long, glass coffin, placed on a low surface of dark wood adorned with gold leaves. Chairs, draped with violet and scarlet velvet stood arranged in an odd manner around the coffin. Just around the coffin were seven chairs arranged to form an elliptical pattern, around those seven chairs were twenty-one chairs arranged to form a circular pattern and around those sixty-three

chairs to form an elliptical pattern. Rose calculated quickly – ninety-one people at the funeral. All the *eligible* Purebloods in Britain.

Most of the third row and half of the second row was filled with witches and wizards in somber black, but the first row was still empty except for a small, blond boy.

“Bella, Cissy and Draco, Dromeda and Nymphadora, Sirius,” Druella ticked off her fingers. “The child shall be with you,” she said, looking down at Rose. “If you’ll acknowledge her as your daughter, boy – the first row is only for blood kin.”

“Rose is like a daughter to me,” Uncle Padfoot said, playfully tugging at Rose’s hair. “C’mon.”

“Will there be coffee after this?” Tonks whispered to her mother. Andromeda smiled wanly and asked her mother, “You won’t need to go to Bellatrix now – she’s already come down.”

Sure enough, a tall, slender woman was striding down the lawn, her long, black hair flowing behind her. She was flanked by an unpleasant-looking woman and a blond, green-eyed woman who looked uncannily like an older version of Daphne Greengrass – Rose decided that it was Daphne’s mother. Tonks’ grandmother *had* mentioned that Cassiopeia Greengrass was tending to Bellatrix. She watched the woman she’d heard so much about with fascination while Tonks’ grandmother rustled over to her.

She settled down into a chair, still staring at Bellatrix – who was now arm-in-arm with her mother – beside Uncle Padfoot, not noticing the small blond boy at the end of the row of chairs who was blinking with surprise at her. Uncle Padfoot was glaring moodily at the glass coffin in front of him, arms and legs folded tightly, pretending to ignore the whispers darting through the crowd like wildfire, the whisperers astonished, disgusted, furious at the presence of the renegade son and daughter of the Black clan – with those disgusting, most-assuredly half-blood children with them! – at the funeral of such a great lady.

Bellatrix and Tonks’ grandmother had now reached the first row of chairs. Bellatrix paused to breathe furiously – her mother softly

entreating her to mind her manners – down at her defiant cousin and cold-eyed sister before striding down the row of seven chairs and falling gracelessly into the seat next to the small blond boy.

It was only then that Rose noticed that the boy was Draco Malfoy. They stared at each other in incomprehension for a moment, steel-grey eyes locking with emerald-green ones. Then, Bellatrix said something in a cold, low voice to Draco and he obediently turned away from looking at Rose. And now, the last few people were arriving, Tonks' grandmother had taken a seat just behind Andromeda – as if to shield from any more criticism – and a woman, who looked strikingly like Mrs Black, only younger, had settled down between Bellatrix and Andromeda. It was the last of the erstwhile Black sisters, Narcissa.

The funeral began when a little, tufty-haired man in plain black robes, standing by one of the large, gloomy trees in the lawn strode over to the coffin. A hush fell over the mourners and Rose shivered involuntarily, even though the lawn was enchanted to be warm. Death made one feel so gloomy. The man began an eulogy in a flat, nasal tone – a long, boring speech detailing the life and achievements of Walburga Black who'd married her second cousin. Rose could make neither head nor tail of the speech – the tufty-haired man seemed to want to praise her, but his praise sounded more like condemnation. Walburga had apparently been very fond of Muggle-hunting and had compiled a more modern version of Nature's Nobility.

Bellatrix's head was bowed during the speech and her sister, Narcissa, was stroking her long, black hair absently, while Draco awkwardly patted her wrist. But when the speech was over, Bellatrix was the first to rise and begin her eulogy – eyes sparkling with fire and unshed tears, voice full of passionate love and equally passionate sorrow, body almost quivering with emotion. Rose didn't remember the words of the speech but what she remembered was the fire and fervor of the beautiful woman. Bellatrix might be – was – mad, brutal, dark, *evil* but she had loved her aunt and now her heart – but not her spirit, never her spirit – was broken.

Rose didn't feel any ounce of sympathy or pity or admiration or respect for her – she hated the woman with every fiber of her being –



but she was fascinated with her. A thrill of fear shot through her, when faced with this wild, wild woman, and an odd, dazed sense of relativity, a grand vision of blood and flames, of sunsets and hells not yet encountered. And she knew, as simply and plainly as she knew who she was, that this woman would make a very deadly enemy one day.

No matter how Uncle Padfoot sneered at her and laughed and taunted her abilities, Rose knew that the woman in front of her was not weak or foolish or naïve. Evil had meant You-Know-Who, an idea spun out of her parents' old stories, old fears that she'd never felt, before. Now, evil meant Bellatrix Lestrange nee Black.

The woman fell silent and walked quietly back to her place, eyes like pale sapphires, and Rose snapped out of her trance. Other eulogies, more tame, less impressive, followed and Rose thought about the woman. She wanted to talk to Uncle Padfoot about her, the first time she'd wanted to talk to him ever since the Mirror-incident, but Uncle Padfoot was firmly silent, looking particularly ferocious and 'hound-like', like Mum said.

The last eulogy was by Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father – they looked remarkably similar. After it was over, twelve women rose out of their seats and glided to the coffin. Their movements were in unison and harmony and they circled the coffin gracefully, hair loose and flowing down their backs, black gowns trailing elegantly on the ground. Among the women were Bellatrix, Narcissa, their mother, Cassiopeia Greengrass and others Rose didn't know – yet. Tonks' grandmother began beating her palms against each other and slowly, each woman in the circle began to follow, slapping their palms in unison. Then they began to glide around the coffin, maintaining the perfect circle formed at the beginning and chant a song.

<i>“Øngan</i>	<i>kveðk</i>	<i>at</i>	<i>óðl</i>
<i>órum</i>		<i>málmi</i>	<i>rýri</i>
<i>pó</i>	<i>gatk</i>	<i>hróðr</i>	<i>of</i>
<i>hljóðs atferðar</i>	<i>prýði...</i> ”		<i>hugðan</i>

It wasn't a beautiful song, the words were too harsh and cut through the air like icy knives, but it had an unearthly quality about it,

hauntingly celestial, almost unholy in its timbre and impact. Rose did not know why, but she began to tremble like a leaf in the wind. She wasn't the only one – Tonks and Draco were quivering even worse and others behind her were shaking as well. A warm hand grasped her own cold one and Uncle Padfoot looked down at her kindly.

“The Jómsvíkingadrápa, and at a funeral too. A heady mixture, hard to resist,” Uncle Padfoot murmured quietly. “No, don't ask me where I learnt about it – I've been to more funerals and I'm used to it. That young man isn't.” And he nodded at Draco. “Do you know him – you looked like you did.”

“Draco Malfoy,” she whispered. “He's in my year, Slytherin – didn't I tell you?”

Uncle Padfoot shook his head. “It figures – where else would Lucius and Cissy's son go? How is the boy?”

“He's a prat – but he's a nice one,” she said softly. Uncle Padfoot smiled faintly.

The song stopped abruptly and the women glided back to their seats, looking a little dreamy, as if they'd just snapped out of a trance. The tufty-haired man rose out of his seat and waved his wand gracefully over the coffin. It was enveloped in a delicate golden mist for a moment and then the mist began to fade, or rather, glide away, settling like gold dust on the mourners, making everyone sparkle and glimmer as though the sun was shining on them. It was very beautiful and very ethereal and Rose felt like she was dreaming. But now, there was no glass coffin. Instead, in its place was a large tomb of black jade. Runic characters were carved deeply into the jade and filled in with silver, so that they glimmered in the sunlight against the dark tomb.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Would you please rise and pay a moment's respect to the departed one!” the tufty-haired man called. Everyone got up and bowed their heads – except for Uncle Padfoot who looked like he wanted to kill something. At last the moment of silence was over and Bellatrix was the first one to rustle over to the tomb and bow her head over it, hands clasped together as if she was praying.

Narcissa followed her, looking melancholy, and gradually, others followed.

Draco looked uncertainly at Rose, as if he wanted to talk to her, but couldn't bring himself to. He jumped in surprise when, his father called out, "Come, Draco – you must be hungry." He half-smiled at Rose, then hurried to where Lucius was.

"Coffee?" Tonks suggested hopefully, dragging her mother to where the breakfast table had appeared.

"You must be starving," Uncle Padfoot said, a little apologetically, glancing at his watch. "Sorry it took so – oh hello."

His aunt had swept over to them. She didn't even bother to answer her nephew, but turned down to Rose instead.

"We might never meet again, child," she said calmly. "But I would like to tell you that you are remarkably like your grandmother, Dorea Black, in appearance – and presumably in character too. She was in Slytherin too. We were great friends once, and many's the day I've seen her in the very same gown you wear now. She was a great lady, and I do hope, for her sake, that you grow up to be like her. Few are the honors that could be as great as for any girl to grow into such a woman as your dear grandmother was. Good day, dear child."

And she bent down and grasped Rose's face in her own delicate white hands and kissed her forehead very tenderly.

"She has it right for once," Uncle Padfoot said absently, watching the stately lady sweep up to her daughters. "Your grandmother was a great lady, little Rose. And she was a good person too, which is even better."

**A/N: Dorea might be dead and Druella might claim she'll never see Rose again, but... well, there's more than meets the eye here. And I've consulted the Black Family Tapestry for dates and names too.**

**To Alexandra: Yep, it refers to Rose. As for why she's reacting so violently, it has something to do with the mirror.**

**To Kike: Voldemort is still behind Quirrel's head. As for why he's teaching Neville, it has something to do with psychological manipulation – I hope that's the right word. Voldemort is now opting for more subtle forms of brainwashing than the painful method he adopted in DH – using the stupid, nasty Carrows to teach the students that Muggles are dumb wasn't a bit effective! He could have been smarter about it if he wanted to set the whole of the young wizarding population of Britain against Muggles.**

**And no, Bellatrix didn't kill Walburga. They love each other, like mother-and-daughter. Bellatrix has a bad relationship with her own mother, Druella, but she was always Walburga's pet.**

## ***Damned or Doomed***

*It had been tossed into a sack of rubbish, along with the snuffbox of Wartcap powder and the music box that made everyone sleepy...*

**Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, British Edition, Pg 156**

**A/N: Three reasons you should review:-**

**This is the second-month-anniversary of Shades of Black!**

**This is a mega twelve-page-sized chapter, so you know I worked very hard on it – plenty of research involved**

**There's a multitude of quotable lines here (I hope) and you all know you want to ask me questions! (Well, I hope so...)**

“Well I never...”

“Ought to be ashamed of himself...”

“Here today, as if *she* would want him, that disgraceful creature...”

“Nasty, low, ill-bred, would never have thought he could have been *their* son...”

“And that dreadful girl too with him – the shame of it, the shame – and Mrs Black actually acknowledging her...”

“What the world is coming to, sweet Morgana preserve our blood for we do need a great deal of preservation nowadays...”

The whispers were no longer whispers, they were loud and clear and soon the air was fairly buzzing with vehement condemnations against Sirius and Andromeda. Andromeda and Tonks – blissful in tumbler of coffee – were shielded from the most violent criticism by Mrs Black who was never far from them, her icily serene face and determined posture enough to silence most, and by Mrs Malfoy, who looked like she was wondering why she was protecting her sister. For his part, Sirius didn't seem to mind the criticism. The further he went from his mother's tomb, the happier he seemed.

“There’s MacNair,” he’d say loudly, pointing out a thickset, hard-faced man to Rose. “One of Bellatrix’s playthings, vicious, violent and nearly as intelligent as those two, Crabbe and Goyle – Malfoy’s minions.”

“Draco hangs out with Vincent and Gregory sometimes,” Rose whispered, watching the two human-mountains lumber around with a round dozen trays each heaped with food.

“Inbreeding,” Uncle Padfoot tsked cheerfully. “Though of course no one beats us Blacks for inbreeding – we’ve really gone round the bend for ugliness and now we’re, all of us, delightfully pretty with enough aesthetic appeal to countereffect the ghastly genes our uncharming but solidly pureblood spouses might hand over to our children.”

When Rose was nine, Uncle Padfoot had discovered – for a month – that he was violently interested in biology and had all but devoured every single Muggle book on the subject he could lay his hands upon. Rose had joined him in his enthusiastic, if short-lived study of the human body and they’d come out with a sizeable quantity of crazy facts, statistics and one or two concepts – like the concept of genetics – about how the body worked.

“Mmm...Aunt Druella must have devised the menu,” he observed, reaching the table. “Everything here looks expensive and thoroughly inedible.”

“She’s beautiful,” Rose said, a little wistfully, watching a house-elf pile a tray with food for her. Daddy said that they’d had house-elves long ago, but when Daddy’s father, Grandpa Charlus, had died – when Daddy was eighteen, Grandma Dorea had freed those of the elves who were willing to be freed and – there was only one – and sent the others to work at St Mungo’s. “I’d give anything to be as beautiful as her, even though she’s so old.”

“You’re beautiful enough,” Uncle Padfoot said firmly, eying a house-elf with distaste. “I hate those things – they give me the creeps.” He meant the house-elves. They settled down near Andromeda and Tonks, under the shade of a large tree. The two were sitting with Mrs Black, Mrs Malfoy and Draco.

"It has been a long time since I've last seen you, Sirius," Mrs Malfoy began, looking very much like a martyr, and speaking with an air of forced politeness. "Time has been kind to you." Draco was watching Uncle Padfoot intently. Mrs Black smiled approvingly at her courteous daughter and even Andromeda's eyes were admiring.

"I'd like to say the same of you – but unfortunately, that would be a lie," Uncle Padfoot said gravely, his eyes twinkling with mischief. Draco looked a little shocked, but half-nodded – almost to himself – as if nothing better could be expected of the renegade Sirius Black. Mrs Black's eyes glittered angrily in Sirius's direction.

Mrs Malfoy's lips tightened, but as if determined to be gracious at this unexpected reunion, she plowed on bravely. "And that is your daughter, I presume?" Tonks winked at Rose over her coffee. Andromeda looked as if she was enjoying herself. She might admire her sister's attempts to be polite, but she still loved a joke at Mrs Malfoy's expense.

"Goddaughter," Uncle Padfoot said cheerfully. "Father, James Potter. Mother, Lily Evans. You know them both, don't you?"

"I've had the pleasure of making their acquaintance," Mrs Malfoy said, looking as if making the acquaintance of the man who had once been known far and wide as a toerag and that of a Muggle-born was anything but pleasant to her. Rose was prepared to wager Harry's amazing mini-Quidditch pitch that the acquaintance-ship had been limited to insults towards her parents on Mrs Malfoy's part and practical jokes towards Mrs Malfoy herself on her father's part.

Draco looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't bring himself to. Uncle Padfoot was about to open his mouth and say something to make Mrs Malfoy's lips even tighter, but Mrs Black spoke out. "You squabble over trifles like a child still, Sirius," she said coldly, wiping the edges of her mouth with a dainty lace handkerchief. "Have you any idea of the property that is lawfully yours from this day?"

"A couple of medieval shacks and some snotty house-elves," Uncle Padfoot said unconcernedly. "Besides this old wreck."

“A three-hundred year old townhouse, a six-hundred year old manor and a twelve-hundred year old fortress,” Mrs Black said icily. “And a single priceless house-elf, worth his weight in gold and jewels – Kreacher.”

Uncle Padfoot shuddered. “You can have him,” he said hastily.

“There’s nothing I would like better – that poor creature is a treasure,” Mrs Black snapped. “What he shall suffer under you, I hardly dare imagine. But, unfortunately, it falls to the heir of the primary estates to inherit the oldest living servant in all the establishments, more’s the pity! There’s a good deal of fine print attached to it, which I doubt you’ll care to read.”

“I don’t need to fall back on inherited wealth to scratch out a living,” Uncle Padfoot said. “Unlike some people.” His eyes lingered on Mrs Malfoy. “You can take everything you want, borrow Kreacher too for as many years as you like.”

“I would like to purchase him,” Mrs Black said firmly.

“You’re welcome to it.”

“Then, pray don’t dawdle over your breakfast,” she said. “We can settle the accounts today. The poor thing is in shock and I would like to ensure a good home for him. It’s the least I can do for such a faithful and devoted servant to your poor Mother.”

“I’ll eat as slowly as I please,” Uncle Padfoot said calmly. And accordingly, he ‘dawdled’ over his breakfast, taking even longer than Harry would have, to finish. Frustrated, Mrs Black swept off, taking Andromeda and Tonks with her. Narcissa too trailed off after they’d left – looking unwilling to spend a moment longer than necessary in her cousin’s company – with a languorous, “Come, Draco.”

Draco rose obediently, but when his mother’s back was turned, beckoned at Rose – who’d already finished – to follow him.

“Good friend of yours?” Uncle Padfoot asked, looking very interested.



“More of Neville’s, really,” Rose said absently, getting up and tagging after Draco, who was hiding behind one of the large trees in the lawn. He was thoroughly concealed from view by the dense foliage of the truly massive tree and Rose had to hunt a little for him, until a cool hand clamped around her elbow and dragged her into a hollow of the tree. She climbed into the child-sized hollow and swung her legs to-and-fro.

“What are you doing here?” Draco practically squealed, rather like a ferret, sitting down cross-legged beneath the tree, so that he was about a foot below her. “Move a bit to the left – no one’ll spot you then. This is the best hiding place there is, here.”

“Been here often?”

“Aunt Bella likes to come and she usually takes me,” Draco said unconcernedly. “She wanted me to like Great Wail, see –”

“*Who?*”

“Great Wail – Great-Aunt Walburga. I never really liked her though,” Draco said absently. “But, why are you here? Are you... connected to Sirius Black?” His usually demure grey eyes fairly glittered with curiosity.

“Yeah,” Rose said, lazily swinging her legs. “He’s my godfather.”

“I know,” Draco said crossly. “Why did he bring you here today? You must be about the only half-blood here today! Well – except for the announcer.”

“You should have figured out by now,” Rose said, looking down at him oddly. “He’s my Uncle Padfoot.”

A moment’s stunned silence, then, unable to contain himself any longer, Draco burst out, “But he can’t be! No way – you don’t mean he’s the bloke that sends you so much money all the time and those weird letters? It just *can’t* be!” He shook his head, as if the idea of the turncoat Sirius Black being the godfather of one of his friends was nonsensical and simply went against the nature of things.

"Give me a reason why it can't be," Rose laughed, feeling more cheerful than she'd felt since she'd gone home for the holidays. Funny really, how she could enjoy herself so at a funeral. Not at all decent.

"Not Sirius Black," Draco said faintly. "He ran away from home when he was sixteen and oh, Rose, Mother's told me stories about him, he was perfectly horrible and did *such* things during the Dark Lord's rise to power and he broke his family's heart and was a true, dyed-in-the-blood scallywag! So, *there!*" And he concluded with a firm, sharp nod.

By now, Rose was laughing herself into hysterics and in very real danger of falling out of the hollow of the tree. "He told me all about that," she finally gasped out when Draco scowled darkly at her and got up to poke her sharply in the stomach. "And it's not really as horrible as you think – it's, oh Circe's pigs, you've got it all backwards. He was a hero during the First War, my dear little boy, not the villain you seem to think...oh please, please don't poke me, I'll be good now, I promise but really you've got it completely wrong..." And she was unable to restrain her laughter.

"Mother says so," Draco said, looking sulky that she was laughing at him. "And she knows – they're cousins."

"Dudley Dursley is my only cousin but I've never seen him," Rose giggled. "And oh Sweet Morgana, won't Uncle Padfoot crow when I tell him what you think of him!" And she really did topple out of her tree, shaking with laughter, landing with a loud *thump* next to Draco.

"Glad to see that one of us is so cheerful," Draco said sullenly. "And I wasn't joking."

"It wouldn't have been as funny if you *were* joking," Rose said, heaving for breath and weakly patting her aching stomach. "It was funny because you were so deeply in earnest." And she found enough breath to manage a sickly smirk.

Draco leaned his chin on his drawn-up knees and pouted firmly. "What's he going to do with his estates?" he finally demanded. "Mother said he would sell them, having no proper family pride."

“How much would they be worth?” Rose asked.

“Running into the billions, I suppose, all three of them – Rowena Ravenclaw’s promised dowry was the Fortress of Lockwind, she was a duchess, see. She had two daughters. The older one ran away so the younger one got it and um, I think she married into the Peverell line and had kids and the kids got married and so on *ad nauseum*, till the Blacks inherited it about nine hundred years ago.”

“How do you know all of that?” Rose whispered in awe. “It’s fascinating!”

“Grandmother Druella and Aunt Bella tell me stories – they both love history,” Draco said, cheeks a bit pink at the compliment. “And besides Grimmauld Place and Lockwind, there’s Columns on the Teche too. Six-hundred year old manor-house or country seat, if you want to call it that. King Edward III of England was a wizard – his mother was the French Princess Isabella and he inherited it from her side – and Nicolas Flamel’s father came to England to train his magic. Obviously, he couldn’t go to Hogwarts being a prince and all. So they built Columns on the Teche for him to grow up in and learn stuff.”

“And let me guess,” Rose said, “He got married to one of the Blacks and they...”

“No,” Draco interrupted. “He had a clandestine relationship with Alianne Peverell – she went under the pseudonym of Alice Perrers – and they had an illegitimate daughter who married one of the Blacks, and she got Columns on the Teche as a wedding present from her father.”

“What’s illegitimate?” Rose asked. “What’s clandestine?”

“Aunt Bella told me not to tell Mother that she’d told me about those two words,” Draco said, shifting uncomfortably. “They, erm, mean that the Peverell girl sort of, er...”

“Spit it out.”

“*Fine* – it means that she slept with him for power and they had a bastard. So there.”

“Oh.” Rose digested this fact in silence for a moment, before another thought occurred to her. “Does that mean she was a whore?”

Draco looked thoughtful, and then shook his head firmly. “No, I don’t think so. Remember we were looking for the definition of that word when Smith called you one that day? It means a prostitute and a prostitute *has* to be poor. Alianne was a Pureblood, a Peverell too. Pre Wizarding Seclusion, almost all the Purebloods were connected to the Muggle nobility and royalty – the French royal dynasty was riddled with wizards – and all those feudal barons were sure rich.”

“But why would be connected to Muggles? Weren’t Muggles scared of witches and wizards? Didn’t they, I dunno, burn them up?”

“Of course the *common* rabble was terrified,” Draco said, looking very superior. “But in those days, things were...different. Wizards and witches could get rich so easily that they bought titles for themselves and established themselves as barons and lords – they freaked those poor Muggles out with their magic, but then the Muggles were poor, so they couldn’t burn up the wizards and witches who practically owned them. And, they used to have a lot of children then, but they had a lot of Squibs too. Out of thirteen children, nine would have been Squibs. But the Squibs would still have inherited their parents’ titles, so all the remaining wizards and witches would have been connected to the Muggle nobility.”

“That’s...profound,” Rose said softly, as he paused for breath. “I wish History of Magic could be as interesting as the stuff your grandmother tells you about.”

“Aunt Bella too,” Draco said firmly. “She tells me loads, she’s even better at me at telling stuff – tells the best stories ever.”

*Your Aunt Bella is a murderess with some very serious complexes. Therefore, she cannot tell ‘the best stories ever’. Maniacs don’t do that.* Rose didn’t want to voice that thought out and anger him again, so she kept quiet, trying to think of an interesting question.

“Do you know what’s going to happen to the tomb?” Draco asked suddenly. Rose shook her head. “Do you know about the Vigil of Iridescence they’ll hold?” Draco asked her again. Rose shook her

head again, causing Draco to look at her pityingly and tell her that she was very, very ignorant and that it was his moral duty to shed light to the dark world of unawareness in which she presently resided. Well, he didn't say that out loud, but his tone and face indicated that.

"As soon as it gets dark," Draco said. "All the twelve ladies who were singing during the funeral are going to sit by the tomb and sing something – I forgot the name of the song, but it's supposed to set her immortal soul at rest – till midnight."

"From dusk to midnight? That must be at least six hours – or probably more, since it's winter!" Rose gasped. "And they're going to sing non-stop for more than six hours?"

"They're all going to have some potion to help them go into a trance; I think it's a mixture between a special Babbling Potion and a dilute dose of the Draught of Living Death, and yeah, they'll sing non-stop."

"But that's –"

"Don't interrupt," Draco ordered her. "Where was I? Ah yes, they all have to kneel by the tomb too and the closest male relative each of them have – it goes in the order of father, brother, husband and son and if none of them are available, a cousin or brother-in-law – is going to stand right behind them and cast a dome around them. It's going to be iridescent."

"Iridescent?" Rose blinked in bewilderment.

"It'll sparkle lots of colors," Draco explained. "It's a tricky spell – and they've got to do it for as long as the ladies, so I guess they'll be in a sort of trance too. And they've already made the tomb a Portkey, so at midnight, it'll go to Lockwind. All the ladies and those men are going to be with it too, so at midnight they'll all be at Lockwind. It's huge, that place is as, I've been there."

"What'll happen at Lockwind?"

"They've got a massive crypt for the Blacks to be buried in there – Aunt Bella took me there when I was four and I had nightmares for weeks and Mother was perfectly *livid* – and they're um, going to put it

there I guess, right between her brother and husband. I wish I could go,” Draco finished wistfully. “I wouldn’t be scared, I know.”

“You, er, want to visit a crypt?” Rose said, raising her eyebrows.

“A bit,” Draco sighed. “But I want to go to the Revels after the funeral! They’re amazing they are, Uncle Rodolphus told me all about them; go on from after the interment to the first rays of dawn. There’ll be a banquet and dancing and Veela in a masquerade and pyrotechnics made of *Fiendfyre* and oh, everything’s going to be simply magnificent!” He looked gloomy. “I begged and begged Mother and Father to let me go, but they said I’m too young! I’m not, it’s no fair, Romulus gets to go and he’s only ten!”

Rose laughed at his resentment. “Who’s Romulus?”

“Uncle Rodolphus’s nephew,” Draco said gloomily. “Rom is Uncle Rodolphus’s brother Rabastan’s oldest son, and he’s the heir to the Lestranger fortunes. Um, he’s also Theodore and Daphne’s first cousin.”

“What?” Rose gasped. “Theodore and Daphne are first cousins?”

“You desperately need to read *Nature’s Nobility*,” Draco said, looking at her pityingly. “Aunt Bella made me read it everyday when I was little, and now I don’t get so muddled up about the familial connections. Did you see Cassiopeia Greengrass, that blond lady who looked like Daphne, who was singing?”

Rose nodded.

“Yeah, well,” Draco continued. “She’s Uncle Rodolphus’s little sister. She had a twin sister, Carina. She was Theodore’s mother and she was killed by Aurors – not for any fault of her own of course – when he was just a baby. Aunt Bella talks about Carina Nott all the time, I bet they were good friends.”

Rose digested this all in silence, vast new horizons of thought now opening up to her. It meant that half of the Slytherins in her year were in very close cousinage to each other. Come to think of it, *she* was

some sort of cousin to Draco. Draco too was silent, but he looked very glum, probably thinking about the Revels he would miss.

“Hello there!” the voice startled them both and they had both leaped up when Uncle Padfoot stepped into view. “I thought I might find you here,” he grinned. “This is the best hiding place there is, here.” Déjà vu, Draco had said the same thing some time ago. He nodded slightly at Draco, whose mouth was now hanging open – almost obscenely – as he took in the man about whom he had heard so much, fascinated.

“You’ve been quite some time,” Uncle Padfoot said. “I’ve already signed the contract selling off dear old Kreacher and I’ve read the finest of the fine print – and I think your Mother wants you, boy. Screeching all over the place she is –”

“My Mother doesn’t screech,” Draco said decisively. Uncle Padfoot raised an eyebrow and Draco turned pink. He muttered something in a die-away voice and ducking under Uncle Padfoot’s arm, scuttled away as fast as his short legs would carry him.

“I bet he’s terrified of me,” Uncle Padfoot said brightly. “The stories Cissy and Lucius would tell him – not to mention, my charming Aunt Druella who holds me in the ‘utmost contempt and scorn’, her word not mine –”

“He does,” Rose chuckled and began to tell him. Uncle Padfoot wagged his head like a dog. “I’m a wanted man, I am, and not only by hormone-driven, underage teenagers who’d pay for my wonderfulness.”

“You *are* full of yourself,” Rose sighed. “I doubt there’s any hope of redemption for you.”

“You wouldn’t be half as fond of me as you are now, if there was any hope of redemption,” Uncle Padfoot reminded her. “I wouldn’t be Sirius Black if there was any hope, Rose – I’d be James Potter who married the woman of his dreams and was scrupulously redeemed into a respectable civilian.” He joined her in laughing. “I think we should go now, there’s nothing left to do. They’ll carry on with the eating and back-stabbing and later at night they’ll have the burial ceremonies...”

“Draco told me – it sounds fascinating...”

“More like nauseating, though the Revels *are* good. Will his mother let him sit up for the Revels?”

“No – and he’s really sad about that.”

“I doubted Cissy would let him,” Uncle Padfoot said, in a tone of conviction. “They are strictly, not for the innocent eyes of oh-so innocent children. That doesn’t mean you. Now let’s run home, shall we?”

“We can hardly do that – I bet this place is a long way off from Godric’s Hollow.”

“Floo, I mean,” Uncle Padfoot corrected himself. “We’ll just tell Dromeda, so she won’t have to look for us later. *She’s* enjoying herself.” They walked out from under the shade of the huge tree and the warm sunlight struck Rose’s face like whiplash, she’d been so long under the tree. Tonks was flirting blithely with several boys. She looked like a younger version of her grandmother at the moment, and very Veela-esque. The boys were practically drooling over her. Her mother was sitting in the smallest gazebo in the lawn, just big enough to allow two people to sit together, in deep conversation with Cassiopeia Greengrass. Daphne was sitting cross-legged at her mother’s feet, looking dreamy, and it was she who first noticed Rose and Uncle Padfoot approaching them.

“Hello!” she said brightly, waving. Her mother and Mrs Tonks looked up, startled. Mrs Greengrass’s eyes rested coldly on Uncle Padfoot, and Rose saw her finger her wand as if she wanted to use it on him. Uncle Padfoot too seemed a little nervous near her – and *that* surprised Rose. Lots of the people at the funeral seemed to hate Uncle Padfoot, but none of them had drawn their wands when faced by him. *And*, Uncle Padfoot had not seemed nervous at all when confronted with them.

“I’m going home,” Uncle Padfoot said, trying to sound confident. “Just wanted to tell you.”



Mrs Tonks' hand rested lightly on Mrs Greengrass's arm and Rose saw her mouth the words, "He's not worth it, Cass. You don't want to do anything now." Then she nodded to Uncle Padfoot, dismissing him. Mrs Greengrass was breathing heavily and Daphne was looking up at her, puzzled. Rose thought, for a moment, that Mrs Greengrass was about to say something, but she didn't – and Rose was grateful that she hadn't, though she didn't know why.

They'd all known each other once, those closely-interconnected Purebloods, grown up together like one huge, extended family with their little personal feuds and vendettas and delicate interrelationships, their secrets dark and closely kept, their passions and emotions all alike – Nature, they were linked intimately by blood, and Nurture, they'd all grown up together. It had been so for centuries, with few rebels to the general rule. Even two insurgents in a generation was a vast number in their select little community. What had precipitated this?

In a world where there were shades of grey, it would not have happened. But when you grew up in a world where there was only black and white, no merging lines, you had to choose a side and stick to it. A world of black and white, a world where brother fought against brother, where mothers disowned sons and cousins killed each other, a world where a single choice could spell doom, where there were no second chances, no turning back – falling, falling, falling, where you could choose either to be damned or doomed... What path would you take? Kill, or be killed?

Rose wasn't thinking that all out, but deep in her subconscious, those thoughts were revolving and the chill of fear flashed in her, tangible really, even though she didn't know what she was afraid of, herself. There was nothing tangible in being afraid of a decision that she might never have to make – and that concept was in itself more frightening than frogs or exams or anything else that she was afraid of. You had a weapon in hand if you could look your fear in the face. You didn't if that fear didn't have a form at all.

Rose and Uncle Padfoot visited the house later to 'see to things'. She discovered the oddest things, a clock that shot bolts at them, a set of robes that tried to strangle them, old books that Uncle Padfoot said were too dark for her to read – even after she protested – and a music box that made her feel very sleepy as soon as she opened. She resolved to take the music box to school and try its effect on Professor Binns. For that, she needed to get three pairs of earplugs and when Uncle Padfoot suggested an impromptu visit to Muggle London, she couldn't resist.

They bought three pairs of earplugs, a sweet teddy bear for 'my sister' – Rose was adamant that her newest sibling would be a girl, even though Harry was equally obdurate that it would be a boy – Muggle chocolates, bouquets of flowers for the house and Uncle Padfoot's apartment...and a pair of stilettos.

"Are you sure you can walk in those?" Uncle Padfoot said doubtfully, watching Rose awkwardly prance around the shop in them.

"I can too," Rose said firmly, in love with the stilettos. "Stilettos are to me what girlfriends are to you."

"A necessary inconvenience?" Uncle Padfoot suggested. "What're you going to do with them?"

"Wear them of course," Rose said, looking up at him with surprise. Stilettos equal to true love.

"And, *where* are you going to wear them?"

"*Everywhere*." Rose had visions of herself gliding along in this most glorious paragon of footwear.

Uncle Padfoot looked truly frightened at the idea, but he bought them, assuring her that she would not live to be an old woman if she wore those stilettos everywhere.

They went into a café, ordered cappuccino – Rose felt very grown-up – and watched a pretty, dreamy-eyed blonde scribble away furiously on a notepad, occasionally taking a sip of her coffee.

“Have you ever heard about the Mirror of Erised?” Rose asked suddenly, not quite knowing why she was asking him.

Sirius was about to open his mouth and tell her of course he did, he’d helped construct the only such Mirror in Great Britain eight years ago, based on the formulas, principles and diagrams laid down by the Ancient Romans and Leonardo da Vinci. However, one look at her flushed cheeks and dreamy, far-away eyes was enough to silence him. He instinctively knew that he was close to unraveling the secret of her gloominess during the first few days of the holidays and why she had avoided him so much during those days.

“No,” he lied blithely. “Why?”

“Ron told me about it, once,” Rose lied too. “It shows you stuff you want. What do you think it would have showed you?”

Sirius realized, by her unconscious use of tense in her last sentence, that she’d actually seen the Mirror of Erised. *The trouble you children get up to – and I bet Ron’s seen it too!*

“I’ve heard about it, I think,” he frowned in concentration. “James might have mentioned it... ah yes, I think his words were to the effect that it showed you the deepest and truest desires of your heart, nothing more, nothing else.”

Rose was blushing furiously.

“I might have seen myself as a pirate with cutlass and parrot and cool hat in tow,” he smiled, pretending not to notice that she was bright red. “And let me guess, you’d have seen yourself marrying Neville?”

Rose raised her eyebrows.

“Ron?” he tried again.

Rose smiled and shook her head.

“Draco?” he finished, wondering if he was taking the wrong track.

Rose wrinkled her nose disdainfully. The very idea of her with any of those three! But here was an opportunity to tell Uncle Padfoot everything. She opened her mouth to speak...

"Here's your cappuccino," the young waitress said brightly, leaning over to flash Uncle Padfoot an ample amount of cleavage. "My name's Irene, by the way."

"Balderdash Drivel, pleased to meet you," Uncle Padfoot said impatiently. "Go on, Rose." The waitress looked disappointed and turned away, but the moment was irretrievably lost.

"I'd have seen myself being a world-famous Quidditch player," Rose said fiercely, taking a deep gulp of her cappuccino and crying out in pain as the hot liquid scalded her tongue.

**A/N: Much has been made of Edward's sexual licentiousness, but there is no evidence of any infidelity on the king's part before Alice Perrers became his lover.**

**He remained on the throne for 50 years; no English monarch had reigned for as long since Henry III, and none would again until George III.**

**Wikipedia, Article on Edward III**

**And we all know that wizards live longer than Muggles...so really, this might all be based on solid historical fact. As for why, Rose is afraid of the choice she might not have to make one day – well, *she* thinks she might not have to make it – it's because she really doubts what she'd do if confronted with such a decision.**

**Theoretically, she doesn't want to do anything to get herself damned – nothing to do with religion, just with ethics and a 'moral centre' as Elizabeth Swann might phrase it – but practically, she knows herself well enough to know that she'd rather be damned than doomed. A beautiful Shade of Black in our charmingly innocent Miss Potter – canon Harry wouldn't have doubted, he'd rather be doomed than damned.**

**To Kike: Regulus is dead, and so is everyone else who should be dead by this point in time.**

**To SRFan!/: Thanks for that about Voldemort – I'm trying to make him and all the other villains a little bit 'smarter' (not that they aren't smart enough in canon!) Bellatrix is going to prove ample proof later on that, that if she hadn't spent 14 years in Azkaban, she'd be a very cunning witch and not some 'weak, simpering sycophant'. It's my first try at banner making, so I'm glad you liked it!**

**To Bugger: Yeah well, all the purebloods in the world are very closely interconnected. Though, I think Draco and Rose are more of third cousins, and there's something removed once or twice – gah, I don't know! As for Smith winking at Rose, well thank God now they're at the stage when winking at each other might be construed as adorable, not romantic. Bask in platonic relationships while you can!**

**To Alexandra: Thanks for the compliment on Bellatrix! She's easy for me to write because she's a lot like Rose and I find Rose very easy to write!**

## ***Unpleasant Truths and Nasty Boys***

*"Love is like war – easy to begin, hard to end and unfair throughout. I speak from experience."*

*"As if you've ever been in love."*

*"I have –"*

*"Let me rephrase that – as if anyone has ever reciprocated any of your ten-thousand, hopeless crushes."*

## **Dorea Black and Druella Rosier**

"My head hurts, my nose is red, I'm hungry enough to swallow Crabbe and Goyle alive together, my feet are freezing and to top all that, *I chipped a nail!*"

"Welcome back to you too, Pansy," Rose yawned, examining her brand-new stilettos minutely.

"Oh you poor *dear!*" Tracey cooed, hurrying over to her best friend and relieving her of her many stylish side-bags. "Mila and I were just wondering when you'd..."

But Pansy's eyes had already fallen on Rose's shoes. Something, close to reverence, kindled in her steel-grey irises and, with an almost worshipful air, she wove her way to Rose – or, more likely, to the stilettos.

"No," Rose said firmly, snatching up the shoes and shaking them above Pansy's head. "You can't have them. You wouldn't even want them – I got them from a Muggle shop."

"I take back everything I might have said about Muggles," Pansy cried, trying to grab the stilettos. "If they can invent shoes like *that...*"

"We'd all attain nirvana much faster," Rose finished for her. "But I'm not concerned about your nirvana, I'm concerned with mine. Yes, I'm self-centered – live with it, Tracey."

Pansy looked sulky as she headed towards her own bed. "Did your parents let you buy that?"

"Of course they didn't," Rose told her. "I had to hide them in my trunk as soon as I got home – behind layers of washed clothes. Mum doesn't check washed clothes."

"I'd look ravishing in those," Pansy sighed mournfully. "They must be \_"

"Four inches, yeah," Rose nodded. "And I don't think you'd want to look ravishing. That would be sick."

"I don't think she means that literally," Millicent clucked. "Besides, nobody uses it in that sense nowadays."

"Hello, everyone," Daphne announced thickly, sauntering in with a bar of chocolate. Millicent's eyes gleamed with interest as they rested on the chocolate.

Before Tracey had a chance to greet her, Rose jumped on her and demanded, "What was that all about?"

"What?" Daphne looked bewildered.

"At the funeral – December 27th," Rose said impatiently. "Don't you remember I was there and..."

"At the gazebo?" Daphne screwed up her face in concentration and then nodded. "Yes, you and your father –"

"Godfather," Rose interrupted. "Didn't you notice the –" she struggled for a word and waved her hands wildly – "the air, the aura, the sexual tension, whatever you want to call it, between your mother and him?"

"Her mother's a widow," Tracey said reproachfully. "There's no way there could have been any sexual ten-"

"Her heart might be buried in her husband's grave but her body isn't," Millicent snorted. "She must have basic needs like –"

“How crude you are,” Pansy yawned, fanning herself with an elegant – and new – Japanese paper-fan.

“Yes, yes – do you have any idea what it was?” Rose demanded.

Daphne licked her lips thoughtfully and made her way to her own bed. “I asked Mamma,” she said finally. “She said she’d wear out my back with a birch rod if I ever mentioned it again, and then she started to cry and kept to her bed for nearly a day.”

Pansy’s eyes were bright with interest. “Who’s your godfather?” she asked Rose suddenly.

“Sirius Black,” Rose said warily, expecting an explosive reaction. She wasn’t surprised – Millicent’s hands jumped to her mouth, Daphne’s jaw hung open and Pansy gave a small shriek of horror.

“And my father is James Potter, and my mother is Lily Evans – Muggleborn – for the record, too,” Rose said impatiently. “Just so you know.”

Silence for a few moments, as Tracey looked around at everyone, bewildered. She was only a half-blood, and not a half-blood with Slytherin connections like Millicent either. Her brother, Roger Davis, was in Ravenclaw and her parents had both been in Hufflepuff.

“How did you ever get into Slytherin?” Millicent finally breathed out.

“I bribed the Sorting Hat with talking rabbits,” Rose said cheerfully. “I threatened to sneak into the Headmaster’s office and paint it bright pink – with Irremovable Dye – if it didn’t put me in Slytherin.”

Pansy was shaking her head slowly. “It’s not so much about your mother, I suppose it’s not her fault she was born as she was, poor thing, but your father and godfather...” Her eyes glinted dangerously. “I could tell you things about them that would make *your* hair curl.”

Rose’s hair was insolently straight, even after all her childhood attempts to curl it. “I know more about them than you think,” Rose said, hugging herself. The temperature in the dormitory had suddenly



dropped by several degrees. "Nothing you can tell me will surprise me."

"Won't it?" Pansy gave a sharp laugh. "Let's take... murder for example. It won't surprise you? That your precious godfather killed *Daphne's* father and that your dear father finished off Theodore's mother? That they slaughtered Flint's father and effectively ended the Cornfoot line during the Massacre at St. Whyteleafe in 1977? *All seven of the last Cornfoots?*"

Daphne was as white as a sheet and Millicent's knuckles were bloodless from gripping each other so tightly. Tracey looked like she was about to be sick, but for the first time in her life, she actually spoke against someone. "That's enough," she said faintly, but firmly. "Shut up, Pansy."

"I won't," Pansy hissed, looking quite mad. "Why should I? It's the truth isn't it?"

"It can be the Ten Commandments, for all I care," Tracey said quietly, but her face was furious. "You shouldn't say things like that." She crossed the room rapidly and put her arms around Rose. Rose's eyes were blazing and there was a bright, hard look on her face. She wanted to kill Pansy but she couldn't... every word of it was the truth; it must be, even if she'd never heard it before... unpleasant yes, but the truth nonetheless. Why was she afraid to face it?

"You talk," Rose said coldly, shaking with her rage and the sick feeling at the bottom of her stomach. "As if *your* parents haven't done the same and will do the same, when the time comes again for us to take up arms again. The War wasn't one-sided, Parkinson, and there was bloodshed and horror and pain on both sides because that's what comes with wars. Your side paid us hell and ours, my parents' and Uncle Padfoot's and *mine*, did the same. It wasn't right, it wasn't wrong; it was just what it was. I can't justify it and I won't justify it but I can't condemn it and I won't, either. The standards for peacetime don't apply for a war – and you *know that* if you're half as old as you act – and when he rises again – and he will, you know it and I know it – I'll do what my parents did and so will you."

The words had tumbled out of her, leaving her half-dazed and bewildered with their vehemence and conviction. She hadn't been just Rose Potter when she'd told Pansy. She'd been part of something... bigger, something large and dark – but not black, just grayish – and powerful, something that hurt her stomach and throat and made her feel like throwing up her lunch. Those weren't her words or Daddy's – even though he'd been the first one to use them – or Uncle Padfoot's – who'd seconded Daddy's retellings of the War with conviction – or Mum's – who'd supported them soberly, almost sadly. They were older and meant something more, even though she didn't yet know what the more was, laced with the passion of the generations who'd loved and hated, fought and lived before her and would after her.

She knew all this very clearly, and for a moment she was frightened, frightened of the past and the future, of the shocking enormity of time which she had never stopped to even consider. She felt older than herself, and yet younger, so much younger.

*“And he will rise again, Rosalie, we all know. And when he does...”*

*“I'll help you fight him!”*

*“That's very sweet of you, dear.”*

Pansy was eying her appraisingly, her expression guarded. Finally she smiled sweetly and put out her hand towards Tracey in a gesture of reconciliation. Her voice was close, masked as she said, “We won't fight about that. I was wrong to bring it all up – you're quite right, of course, Rose. It was very vulgar of me. Do you forgive me?”

“If you promise not to do that again,” Tracey said softly, smiling faintly.

“I promise,” Pansy smiled warmly. “Let's not quarrel over this.”

“Of course not,” Rose said, smiling as warmly as Pansy. “Let's save our quarrels for the things that matter in life, shall we?”

“Your life or mine?” Pansy asked. “There's a difference between us, Potter, there'll always be.”

“Yes,” Rose said graciously. “The difference between being brought up to distinguish between good and bad and being brought up to call everything vulgar in seven different languages.”

**000**

“You are up to no good.”

“Me?” Rose tried to assume an innocent expression. Judging from the look on Ron’s face, she had failed miserably.

“Yes, you,” Ron said, shooting her and Neville, who was snickering behind her, a half-baleful, half-amused glance. “And you too.”

“I am the Boy who Lived,” Neville said gravely, entering the first History of Magic class of the new term. “I am never up to no good.”

“Use of double negatives – indicates lying,” Ron smiled. “See if I ever lend you two notes again.”

“We can always make up things during the exam,” Rose told him. “History doesn’t count as a subject.”

Ron looked like a disapproving tabby-cat – almost uncannily like McGonagall in a bad mood – as he settled into place behind Padma Patil, quill and parchment at hand, ready to take notes like a good boy. The Ravenclaws all pretended to take notes in History – though most of them had given up the pretense by now, four months into their first year, faced by the indomitable tedium of Professor Binns’ classes. The Slytherins didn’t even pretend. They played games, chatted or – in Rose’s case – practiced writing with their left hand.

Rose slipped demurely into place between Neville and Draco in the last row as Professor Binns entered the class in his usual way – through the blackboard. She tossed them the earplugs she’d bought from Muggle London – Draco didn’t know that they were Muggle inventions – as Binns cleared his throat and began a lecture on goblin riots, extraordinary for the invincible stupefying effect it produced on his students. The dainty, filigree silver music box was small enough to fit in her hand. Underneath the desk, she opened it, anticipating the

sweet, lulling melody that would soon fill the room and put everyone to sleep...

One by one, heads began nodding and children collapsed face first into desks, slid off benches or crashed into walls behind them. Professor Binns, blissfully unaware that most of his pupils were falling into an enchanted trance, droned on for a few moments before he too began to nod off and finally, with a huge yawn, bent backwards, his notes flying everywhere and then landing as lightly as snowflakes – yellowing snowflakes closely written on – on the floor. Part of his body went through the blackboard into the room behind the History classroom – which was empty, as Neville had made sure of before agreeing to the prank, foreseeing the situation –, while the other part was still in the room.

It was a lovely sight, and Draco – whose Grandfather had given him a camera for Christmas – instantly photographed it. The entire classroom asleep – either on their desks, on the floor, or against walls – half of Binns' ghostly body rising out of the blackboard, his treasured notes – there could never be notes as boring as his anywhere else – helter-skelter on the floor...

"Grandfather will love it," Draco chuckled. "He and Binns were at school together."

Rose laughed softly, shutting the music box and pocketing it. Apparently death did not make you invincible against a little music box. She high-fived Neville and Draco and removed her earplugs, waiting for the others to wake up.

Blaise was the first. He whooped in joy when he saw Binns' condition and called to Rose, "Do you think Padma'll let me snog her now?"

"She will, but I won't," Rose told him firmly. "I am the Defender of the Virtue of all helpless girls."

"Why don't you open up a Knight in Shining Armor business, then?" Ron yawned, waking up. "On hire, a skinny eleven-year-old git, possessor of a Nimbus 2000, to protect the virtue of your daughters and girlfriends. For more details, kindly contact etc."

"I think that's demeaning to women," Michael Corner announced, waking up with a start. "Anti-feminist."

"Gay, gay, *gay*," Draco muttered under his breath.

"Well, Draco, just because *you* can't be bothered to think about the big issues of the world doesn't mean that everyone else who does is homosexual!" Padma hissed. "Personally, I thought that was brilliant, Michael, a regular rouser of a brief..."

"So quoth Ravenclaw in the wee hours of the morn when from her lover's home she did stray to..." Daphne hummed, blinking her wide, grass-green eyes open.

"Um, Daphne?" Theodore Nott said, half-awake, but looking very embarrassed. "That's an, er...pornographic poem. Not suitable right now."

Rose remembered, with a sudden jolt, that they were first cousins.

"That was a nasty trick to play!" Tracey cried, looking quite indignant. "What's going to happen to poor Professor Binns?"

Everyone stared at her. Pansy yawned like a hungry lioness and, with one eye open told her friend – or rather, satellite – coolly, "Poor Professor Binns? More like poor Miss Parkinson, I've got a bruise the size of Scotland on my forehead, falling on this cursed desk... really, Tracey, you have no consideration for me at all..."

"Oh, Pansy, does it hurt? Oh I'm so sorry for neglecting you!" Tracey squealed, fussing around Pansy. Pansy smiled like one appeased. Everyone was getting up with sudden, quick jerks and jolts. Professor Binns woke up, or rather, disentangled himself from the blackboard, just before the bell rang. They thought he was about to actually speak to them – he didn't speak to them, he gave them notes and homework and that was all the contact they had with each other – but he only said, "Hmm, yes, a foot-long essay on the Riots of 1433, by Tuesday. Class dismissed."

That had been two weeks ago, and in the interim Rose had been concentrating on two things mainly: trying to wear her new stilettos at Hogwarts and thinking an idea through. She soon learnt, however, that stilettos and ancient castle-schools did not go together – unless you were uncommonly brave or uncommonly thick-skinned.

The castle, especially the dungeons, was bitterly cold and it was flatly impossible for anyone to wear any footwear without thick socks. And sexy stilettos with four-inch high heels simply did not go with the bright red-and-green socks (decorated with animated Snitches) that comprised Rose's entire wardrobe of socks. Still, she might have attempted to brave the cold – she wasn't afraid of getting her toes frozen off if she could look pretty while doing that – had she been positive that she could carry the look off. It took a lot of practice, she quickly discovered, to walk without looking like an erratic chicken, in high heels. She couldn't maintain her balance on her beautiful new shoes for more than a few seconds standing straight, and when she did – once – try to walk in them, she sprained her ankle without further ado.

Madam Pomfrey – “Such shoes for a little girl! Really, what the world is coming too...” – and Flint – “If you miss Quidditch practice by even a day...” – expressly forbade from wearing the stilettos and so, outwardly sullen but inwardly very glad, she put them away on the little table beside her bed, so that she could admire them everyday when she woke up.

The thinking of an idea through, though, was new for her. Rose leaped before she looked. She had brilliant ideas and then messed them up by executing them before properly planning them out. But this was no ordinary idea, and even she was ready to admit that it wasn't exactly what you might call 'safe'.

*That music box works on ghosts... Ghosts are dead, and so they shouldn't be able to go to sleep... but the music box works on them...so, it wasn't exactly sleep that it produced, but a really powerful trance... so the music box has strong magic attached to it... strong, very strong...*

*Fluffy's guarding something really strong... So Fluffy has to be very strong (and is)...but so is Death... but the music box works against death too (well, not like that, but against ghosts so sort-of)... so, it might work against Fluffy... make Fluffy fall asleep and...*

*Mmm, what an interesting idea... no, it's too dangerous...*

*Oh c'mon, I bet Daddy and Uncle Padfoot did loads more dangerous stuff when they were at school...*

*And do you think Mum liked that?*

*Psht, Mum's a killjoy.*

*And Uncle Padfoot is reckless.*

*Daddy is perfectly balanced.*

*Yes, but...*

*The music box has to work. It has to.*

*You have no guarantee...*

*Well, it worked against a ghost, didn't it? So it has to work against a mutant hound.*

*And you know that because...*

*I am God. The world works according to my whims.*

*Riiiiight...*

She just wanted to see if the music box would work against Fluffy. She didn't want to steal the Philosopher's Stone behind Fluffy, no, she did not, she did not, she did not, she did *not*, just wanted to see if the music box worked against that dog... Her intentions were pure and noble and clean, she was a good girl, an angel without wings-and-halo, and her quest was one born of pure scientific inquisitiveness, of course...

But she didn't want to go alone. Suppose the music box didn't work (not that it wouldn't!) but say if it *didn't*, well... she didn't want to die alone, she wanted back-up, support, someone to accompany her and if things went wrong (she wasn't thinking of that possibility, there wasn't a slightest chance that it would go wrong), save her skin, or if things went right (not that they wouldn't!), applaud her brilliance. Accordingly, she broached the topic in an artlessly artless manner to Draco.

They were in the Common Room one night and Neville was reading a book by a Muggle bloke – some Winston Churchill – that Quirrell had lent him and which he claimed was 'fascinating'. Rose called it mind-numbingly dull, and even Ron – after a glance at the first few pages – agreed that it was quite a slough to go through.

Draco was in a very good mood. Rose had let him defeat her in three successive games of wizarding chess, written half of his Defense Against the Dark Arts essay for him and gifted him a box of Sugar Quills – his favorite sweets.

"Wasn't that a good trick, that one we played on Binns that day?" she asked, mournfully watching him finish her Sugar Quills.

Draco smacked his lips in appreciation of her sweets and nodded brightly.

"I got that music box from Grimmauld Place," she said casually.

"I've seen it, once or twice," Draco murmured, patting his overloaded stomach and looking at peace with himself and the world.

*Greedy pig! How can you finish a box of 56 Sugar Quills in fifteen minutes? Even Harry can't do that!* "It's very powerful, isn't it?" Rose said, smiling brightly at him and trying to conceal her loathing of him and his appetite.

"Nearly everything at Grimmauld Place is."

"Sooo," Rose said, handing another box of Sugar Quills to him – and feeling very sad that bribery didn't come cheap – "I was thinking... if



it's so powerful... surely it ought to work against... oh, I don't know, maybe Fluffy?"

Draco picked up a Sugar Quill from the box, inspected it thoroughly and then popped it into his mouth. He munched it through and licked his lips before saying firmly, "Drop it."

"Excuse me?"

"I am not," Draco said resolutely, snatching a Sugar Quill, "Going to try to steal the Stone or whatever it is you want to do, with you. So you can drop the act now."

Indignant, Rose snatched her box of Sugar Quills back from him. "I never thought about doing that! I just wanted your opinion!"

"And I love reading Winston Churchill's war speeches," Draco said, sucking his last Sugar Quill. "Of course."

Rose glared at him sulkily. "How did you know?" she asked finally.

Draco carefully finished his Quill and licked his lips afterwards – he was very disgusting, Rose decided – before answering, "Your face gave you away. You're not a bit subtle."

"And you don't have table manners," Rose told him sullenly.

"You can always ask Neville," Draco reminded her. "Work on his Boy-who-Lived tendencies and bully him like you do."

"I do not bully –"

"Whatever you say," Draco said carelessly, reaching out for her box of Sugar Quills. "Manhandle, threaten, molest..."

Rose impatiently slapped his hand away. "No Sugar Quills for you. You're a bad boy."

"Well, then there's always Smith," Draco half-laughed, not serious. He looked at her box wistfully. "Can't I please –"

“Ask Pansy. She’s going to marry you as soon as you’re of age. It’s *her* job to supply you with Sugar Quills.”

“Pansy likes healthy food,” Draco scowled. “And she thinks I should too. Carrot sticks and watered-down salad, that’s her kind of food... she’s horrible.”

Rose laughed, glancing at Neville, buried in his Winston-Churchill book. She knew, from years of experience, that she’d never be able to get *him* to try the music box against Fluffy. Neville was the antonym of reckless. He would never do anything dangerous unless he was positively sure he would get something out of it. As far as she knew, he had no interest whatsoever in Philosopher’s Stones.

Smith wasn’t really an option either. He was a prat, and not even a nice one like Draco. He’d called her a whore.

*“Oi! Potter!” a voice called and Smith was running towards her. He stopped next to her, looking slightly breathless.*

*“What?” she demanded, not in the mood for him and his antics.*

*“I forgot to tell you,” he said, still huffing. “I think you’re the craziest, most hare-brained, thick-skinned girl I’ve ever met.”*

*“Buzz off,” she snapped, hugging herself. “It was your own fault you followed me – I never asked you to, did I?”*

*“But,” he continued, as if she hadn’t interrupted. “I think you’re the bravest, most unselfish girl I’ve ever met too.”*

*“I still don’t like you,” she told him. “You’re a foul-mouthed, arrogant, nasty poser and the greatest jerk of all time.”*

*He grinned. “Same here, I still think you’re raving insane. And one day, I’ll be Gryffindor Seeker and beat you in every single game, see if I don’t.”*

He was still a foul-mouthed, arrogant, nasty poser and the greatest jerk of all time. There was no way she was going to ask him to help her. No way at all.

A month later, she was ready to reconsider. The idea gnawed on her, bugged her, drove her half-insane – even more so, because she tried not to think about it and that made her think about it all the more – until there wasn't a moment when she wasn't thinking of Fluffy versus Music Box. *I am dying a slow and painful death from an ingenious idea. If I don't do something about it fast, I won't just be dying, I'll be dead.*

But she still didn't have the nerve to go alone. It was just too... scary.

Draco absolutely refused to go, even after a month of coaxing, bribing and threatening. He laughed when she promised him she'd protect him and informed her that in an emergency, he was positive she would prefer saving her own skin to his and that he didn't want to martyr himself for her – he was too pretty to die at eleven. And Rose already knew, from six years of experience, that Neville's answer would be more than just a firm 'no' – he'd probably go tell the teachers if he thought she was in earnest. Rose considered it frankly insulting that he thought that she was a threat to herself. She wasn't *that* reckless...

There was only Smith left – unpleasant, mouthy Smith who didn't care about his Potions' grades and was hopelessly biased and just plain *nasty*. No, the idea had not occurred to her to ask him. No, it was not a tempting idea. No, she would not go mad if she didn't ask him and soon, too. Nonononono...

"Um, Smith?" Rose asked tentatively, grabbing the blond Gryffindor after one Potions' class. He looked down at her in surprise and raised his eyebrows as if to say, *You?*

"Can I, er, have a word with you?"

"You already are," Smith reminded her, swinging his bag around his shoulders and taking off from the dungeons. Draco flashed Rose a thumbs-up from the other side of the classroom, snickering when Neville asked him why Rose was talking to Smith.

Rose sighed in exasperation and trailed after Smith, following him up through the torch-lit dungeons, through the Great Hall filled with early diners, up the Great Staircase, across landings and corridors. She pursued him doggedly even when he tried to duck underneath the surging crowd, laughing and chattering after the last class of the day, and escape. She'd made up her mind and she would stick to it – no, she would not run away like a little coward, the idea hadn't occurred to her at all...

"When are you going to leave me alone?" Smith finally asked, looking a little annoyed, when they'd finally reached a deserted corridor and they only sounds were the distant din of the crowd of students far away and their own footsteps on the flagstones. He didn't even look around, but there was no mistaking the irritation in his tone.

"When you listen to me," Rose panted, very tired and very annoyed – at herself and that stupid Smith.

"I am listening," Smith snapped, without turning around.

"Then turn around," Rose ordered him.

"You forgot the magic word..."

"*Crucio?*" Rose suggested. "My father's an Auror and he taught me the Unforgivable Curses."

"As *if*," Smith snorted in contempt, but he did turn around, looking very demonic with his snapping black eyes and repulsive scowl. "I give you ten seconds, and then you can buzz off to your stupid Slytherin friends."

*What you need is a good spanking*, Rose thought, feeling a lot like her mother. *Even Harry's politer than you are – and that's saying something!* But she began at once, telling him about the Philosopher's Stone without missing a beat – though he did miss some when he heard what was behind Fluffy – the music box – "I wish I could have seen Binns," Smith sighed enviously, "Hermione told me about that" – and what she wanted to do. She finished abruptly and drew breath, waiting for his response.

It was a long time in coming, but finally Smith told her gravely, "You are crazy."

"I wouldn't be me if I wasn't," Rose said seriously. "But this is not a debate on wondrously crazy I am. This is..."

"And *I'm* crazy," Smith interrupted, laughing outright, black eyes now shining with glee. "We should form a club and make plans to dominate the universe."

"Megalomania is symptomatic of manic or paranoid disorders," Rose told him calmly and smiled charmingly when he stared and muttered something about damned Slytherins. "That means you're a narcissist with a superiority complex and delusions of grandeur." Uncle Padfoot had always been fond of psychology and even though she found most of the books on it boring, some of the facts that Uncle Padfoot tended to quote at random intervals stayed in her head.

Smith stared and muttered something about damned Slytherins.

"Excuse me?" she asked him, cheerful because she knew he was going to agree and she would finally be at peace.

"Do you promise to *try* to get me from being mauled alive if your plan doesn't work out?" he demanded.

"I promise," Rose said dutifully, with very little intention of keeping her promise. If he got mauled alive, that was his fault. If she got mauled alive, it was still his fault.

"Liar," Smith said, reading her mind. "You're a Slytherin. Slytherins never keep their promises."

"Gryffindors can't see beyond their own personal glory," Rose reminded him. "We Slytherins know about teamwork. You Gryffindors only know about lone agents."

Smith looked a little confused.

"Flint told me," Rose explained. It was an apt quotation, though she wasn't quite sure of the meaning herself. "And I keep my promises."

Now that wasn't strictly true (actually it was more false than true) – she never even tried to keep her promises to Mum to be good to Harry.

"I don't need you to keep myself from being mauled alive," Smith said arrogantly. "So I don't really care if you keep your promise or not."

*And the point of trying to make me promise was...?* "So..." she began, now uncertain whether it would not be better to reconsider her generous offer.

"I'll join you," he said, looking as if he was doing her a great favor – but only because I want to see that dog again." Smith smiled reminiscently.

"You are... odd," Rose said, unable to find any other words to describe him. "That's the only polite way I can think of describing you."

"I dare you to use the worst terms in your vocabulary to describe me – there's nothing you've heard that I haven't, China Doll," he said.

"Thank you," she said pleasantly. "But I think it a waste to use my worst words on you." *And there's the fact of course that you'd laugh even if I used them – Pansy really is right here. You are vulgar!*

Smith shrugged. "So," he said, suddenly businesslike. "Tonight's as good a night as another. You meet me at the Great Hall at..." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Two-thirty sharp in the morning. No one's around then. But mind it's not two-twenty-four – the Fat Friar takes a round then – or two-forty-one – Peeves inspects the Hall then, and he's even more punctual than the Bloody Baron."

"How do you know?" Rose wondered.

"Through experience," Smith said smugly. "Now scram."

Rose willingly scrambled, deciding that he was not quite right in his mind. Anyone who wanted to see a huge, three-headed dog without any good reason – and yes, she had a good reason, a very justifiable reason – was just plain crazy.

**A/N: Another big chapter! I'm getting quite good at making them large nowadays!**

## ***Lamb for Slaughter***

*This was the real danger of The War: trying to love without trust.*

## **The War, by truthsetfree**

Neville had gone up to bed early, claiming a headache. When Rose had suggested he go to Madam Pomfrey, he'd only shaken his head, muttered something about his scar and stomped upstairs, his homework in shambles. Being the desperately good friend that she was, Rose wrote his Astronomy answers for him – she'd learned long ago how to forge his handwriting – and was making some headway on his Potions essay when Draco trooped in from the Owlery.

She told him about Neville and together, they finished his Potions essay and his Charms précis for him. They still had their own homework to finish, and it was nearing eleven o'clock – past their usual bedtime – when they'd both finished.

"Going up to bed now?" Draco asked, signing his name with a flourish.

"In a bit," Rose lied. She knew she'd never wake up in time if she went to bed then. She'd just sit here and read something and run up later to get the Marauders' Map. *Thank God we have double History first thing tomorrow morning... I can make up for lost sleep, then.*

"Night," Draco said, rolling up his homework and striding up the stairs to the boys' dormitories. Rose took out a book her mother had sent her and assured her she'd love – *Pride and Prejudice*, a Muggle classic from some antique Jane Austen person. She curled up in her chair and opened the book, determined to begin reading it – she hadn't opened the book yet, and Mum had sent it to her at least two weeks ago.

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.*

Ok. WHAT?!

*However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the*



*minds of surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.*

That line hadn't even made sense. And it was sexist – Michael Corner, armchair advocate for political correctness would have a heart attack. 'Rightful property'? *Excuse me*. Mum's ideas about the sort of books girls liked were sadly outdated. Rose tossed the book absently on a table nearby and stared at the crackling flames in the hearth, counting sheep so as not to fall asleep. She was at her one-hundred-and-fifty-seventh sheep when her head began to nod despite her best efforts, and at the one-hundred-and-seventy-fifth sheep, she collapsed against the side of her chair, falling soundly asleep.

The rustle of cloaks and the patter of feet on the flagstones woke her up with a sharp start. Her head bounced off the armrest and she gave a sharp yelp of pain at her cramped muscles and stiff neck. The two people who'd just entered the Common Room stopped dead in their tracks – Marcus Flint and a fourth-year girl, both blushing and looking very wind-blown. Rose had an idea that they'd been doing something... inappropriate for they both looked very guilty and very annoyed with her. She smirked at them evilly, before remembering to glance down at her watch.

*Two-twenty-four a.m.* Damn, there was no time to get the Marauders' Map. She waited for Flint and his girlfriend to exchange a tender parting kiss before sprinting out the Common Room and dashed through the numbingly cold dungeons, patting her pocket for the music-box, running faster than she'd ever done before. She was more out-of-breath than cold – she didn't have a cloak on – when she entered the Great Hall, three seconds short of two-thirty.

She collapsed against the Staircase, clutching a stitch in her side and muffling her painful, hacking coughs with her elbow. A light touch on her shoulder startled her and she almost shrieked, before Smith whispered (in what she supposed he meant to be a reassuring voice, though it was anything but), "Only me. Good timing." He gallantly offered her an arm which she took weakly, allowing him to drag her up the stairs, too exhausted to talk and still clutching her side. Smith

too, didn't seem to be in any mood for conversation as he drew her up the steps, he was practically quivering with excitement.

They reached the door, and Smith leaned against the wall, looking expectantly at her. Still a little tired, Rose pulled out the music-box and patted her pockets for the ear-plugs. Then she realized, in dismay that she'd forgotten – or rather, she hadn't had any time – to bring them. "I forgot the plugs!" she wailed, feeling rotten.

"Idiot," Smith muttered, "Just what I expected from a silly little Slytherin..." Rose opened her mouth to retort, but he waved her off impatiently with a, "Shut up, I'm trying to think." He frowned in concentration and chewed his nails for a few moments before taking out his wand.

"We'll have to use cloth," he announced calmly. "Won't work for long against *that*, I s'pose, but we won't be there for more than a few seconds."

"But I don't have cloth!" she exclaimed.

"And I look as if I go around carrying bolts of cloth in my pockets at two in the morning, right?" Smith snapped impatiently, frowning like he was trying to remember something.

"Well, yes, you do seem the type of dolt –" Rose began.

"*Discerpo*," he said suddenly, pointing his wand at her arm. Rose moved away a split-second too late, her sleeve had been slashed open from wrist to elbow, and the thick blood-red material floated softly to the floor before he snatched up, and began to cut it into smaller pieces with his wand. Rose fingered her arm gingerly; there was a long light cut – very minor, it could have been made with a sharp quill – stretching from her elbow to her wrist. It stood out starkly white against her lightly tanned and freckled arm.

"Sorry," Smith said, not sounding sorry in the least. "Uncle could have done the work a lot more neatly."

"Uncle?"

“Uncle Emerich,” he said absently, balling the cloths together into tight, hard balls with magic, “I live with him.” He handed her two balls and stuffed the other two into his ears.

“Can you hear me?” he said after she’d done the same. She nodded and he looked slightly disconcerted.

“Only a bit though,” she whispered, trying to boost up his spirits.

He blinked and gestured for her to say it again. “It works to a certain extent,” she said more loudly, “You were yelling at me, so I could hear you – but it sounded like your normal voice. You can’t hear me with those stuffed in if I whisper.”

He nodded and mimed opening the door. Rose’s hands were on the lid of the music-box, ready to open it, as she nodded and smiled nervously. He finally opened the door, clutching his wand tightly, looking little short of terrified. They stepped inside, close together, and before the dog had time to more than register their presence, she opened the music box.

The effect was instantaneous. The three heads stopped mid-growl, thick ropes of saliva suspended midair as the dog blinked stupidly, groaned once, and let all three heads droop to the floor. They hit the floor at the same time with a heavy thud that vibrated through the corridor and made Rose jump.

It had only been three seconds, and Rose would have been quite pleased with the effect and ready to run out of the room... but she wasn’t able to. The music box was working on Rose and Smith too – the balls of cloth were little protection – and Smith’s head was already lolling. Rose could feel herself drowsing off in spite of herself, she was so far away from it all, the corridor was fading fast. She strained out wildly against the trance, lashing out physically against the doze enveloping them invisibly, and for half-a-second, the room was in sharp, highlighted focus – too bright and too green, but there it was all the same – and she made a move for the door, but then it was blending out again, faster than before, darker, darker...

Her mouth opened but she stopped mid-scream, her voice not coming out, half-asleep already... No, she was stronger, she was,

she *was*, she couldn't die here, not now... but everything was fading away, and she wasn't herself anymore, she was going, she was going, she was...

Her head crashed into the wall and she woke up with a start. With a superhuman effort of will, feeling like she was drowning and the only thing holding her back was herself – weak shield of protection – she grabbed Smith's hair, kicked open the door and collapsed against the corridor, slamming the music-box shut and the door closed. Then suddenly, she wasn't dreaming any longer and she crashed into reality with a sickening jolt.

She was half-lying, half-sitting against the wall, Smith's head – and a chunk of his hair free from his scalp; she must have been pulling harder than she knew – on her lap, the music-box resting against her feet. Half the sleeve on her left arm was gone and she was freezing and shaking, one part of her still dazed, the other wide awake and shivering with a mixture of cold, nerves and excitement.

"Wha-?" Smith groaned and she buried her nose into his warm hair because her nose was sub-zero and he looked like he'd shampooed his hair. It made perfect sense to her.

Smith screeched as her cold nose came into contact with his scalp and knocked her off, trembling. The balls of cloth fell from his ears, and Rose pulled them out of her own, too.

"S'alright," Rose mumbled, wanting to assure him that she wasn't a rapist. "We made it through."

"No," Smith groaned. "I don't think we did – look at the time. It's-it's seven in the morning! We've been dozing there for *hours*!"

"I have a double period of History now," Rose told him.

"Good for you," he said sourly. "I have Transfiguration. McGonagall's going to make sure sleeping's the last thing on my mind then."

"As if you needed any more," Rose snorted. "You feel asleep first, and you weren't even the one to get up first. See, I kept my promise of getting you from being mauled alive." She didn't trouble to remind

him that the only reason she'd woken up at all was because, by some fluke, her head had crashed into the wall pretty hard. There was a lump the size of Ireland on her head, and she fingered it lightly, feeling very sad for her poor delicate little head.

*"The dog was asleep, with no chance of waking up,"* Smith sang. "There was no possibility of being mauled alive!"

"Don't squabble over trifles," Rose said calmly. "I'm always right. There's no possibility of you ever being right when I'm around."

"You need a therapist," he said quietly, and muttered something under his breath.

"Excuse me?" Rose demanded.

"You don't want to hear what I said," he yawned, picking himself up with a groan. "Come on, people will suspect something if they see us here."

Rose bounced up with the music box, counting her injuries – lump, size of Ireland, on skull, check, half-of-right-sleeve gone, check, already-healed-cut-on-right-arm, check. Not that bad, all things considering. She'd found out what she'd wanted.

They parted on the second floor landing, relatively empty now, Smith going up the stairs to the Gryffindor Tower, Rose going down to the Slytherin Dungeons.

"Oh – by the way," he called suddenly, just as she was about to descend the stairs. "About what else I said – you need to get laid." He cackled madly and scampered up the stairs, leaving Rose – and several others who'd heard – gaping. There was no hope of redemption for him, really.

**000**

Rose was dozing in History class; when, mid-way through the first period, Draco shook her awake roughly.

"Just two minutes more, Mum," she wailed softly in her sleep.

“Do I even *look* like your mother?” Draco demanded, sounding disgusted.

“You sound like her,” Rose mumbled, still half-sleeping.

Draco calmly took his History book and sent it crashing into her spine. She sat up with a scream, heard by all the class – who turned to her bemusedly – except Professor Binns who continued serenely on, not noticing that one of his students was trying to murder another.

“*That hurt!*” Rose hissed furiously, now wide awake. “You great, big –”

“That really was unjustified,” Neville remarked thickly, halfway through a bar of chocolate.

“Was not,” Draco said smugly. “Turn around, Neville, Rose and I have some *private* conversation.”

“No, we do not,” Rose snapped, “Unless it involves me brandishing a bloody axe and whooping maniacally and you cowering in fear and chains at my feet.”

“You have sick fantasies,” Neville muttered, sketching a picture of him as he wanted to be – tall and muscled with a pretty girl, who looked uncannily like Cho Chang, swooning in his arms.

Outraged, Rose was about to throw her whole bag full of textbooks at Draco, but he silenced her with a hissed, “*I know what you did tonight.*”

“What? Aside from butchering a few innocent Puffskeins and chewing off your girlfriend’s ears?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Draco began.

“Of course you do – it’s Pansy. And if you don’t have a girlfriend, then you’re just hopelessly gay.”

“Much as you have a boyfriend,” Draco said indignantly. “I could say – but I won’t, because I’m not vulgar and you’re always changing the subject.”

“And what’s that subject?” Rose demanded testily.

Draco looked like an evil, dark Angel of Doom with his demonic smirk and his angelic expression as he whispered, “You. Fluffy. Music Box. Tonight.”

Rose raised her eyebrows.

“Pansy told me stuff that made me... suspicious,” he smiled smugly. “You never entered the dorms last night. And when you did get in round eight in the morning –”

“Seven-thirty,” she interrupted.

“...Half your sleeve was torn off. Of course Pansy thought you’d been up on the Astronomy Tower –”

“And *why* would I want to be on top of the highest – and might I remind you, *open to the elements* – tower in the castle on a February night without my cloak on?” Rose demanded disgustedly.

Draco waggled his eyebrows significantly and smirked even more significantly, causing Rose to reach out for her History textbook to wham into his cranium. “Of course I didn’t believe her,” he said hastily, squirming away from the book Rose seemed ready to slam into his face. “I knew you’re not like *that*, even if your parentage is er...questionable...”

“Charmed by your lack of prejudice, as usual...”

“So I put two and two together, and instead of getting three or five, I managed to come to four!” he smiled toothily like Harry did after completing a sum in long division.

“Way to go, Holmes,” she said sarcastically. “Sure you don’t need a lollipop?”

"I'll pass," he smiled and leaned forwards. "So did it work? Stop looking at me like that; I know you finally scrapped the guts to use the music box against Fluffy. You took Smith too, didn't you?"

Rose nodded, and then suddenly whirled around in her seat, knocking Neville's jaw hard with her shoulder in the process. He'd practically been leaning on her shoulder, his chin centimeters away, and she'd sensed his presence even though he hadn't uttered a word. Neville yelped softly and collapsed against his chair, blushing when she coolly reminded him that eavesdropping – especially on Rose Magnificent Potter – could lead to unpleasant consequences.

"Sorry," he half-mumbled. "You didn't really..."

"Of course she did," Draco said cheerfully. "She hasn't got the sense of a Puffskein."

"Why would I want the sense of a Puffskein?" Rose inquired gravely.

"We're all Puffskeins at heart," Draco said dreamily. "Cute, huggable, pettable..."

"What about McGonagall? Is she –"

"I'm talking about myself," Draco said calmly. "I am vast. I contain multitudes. Three-quarters of this universe is me, and the last quarter is everything else in – or not in – existence. What's up, Nev?"

"Nev?" Rose snorted eloquently. "That's just about the stupidest nickname I ever heard, it's worse than calling Snape 'Sev' or Hermione Granger 'Mione'."

Neville shook his head, absentmindedly doodling his name all over his picture of his grown-up self and Cho Chang swooning at his feet. It was a very good picture, even for Neville's high standards. When they'd been little, Neville had been the best drawer, Rose the best at Quidditch, Hannah the best at cooking, Ginny the best at looking gorgeous and Ron the best at everything else – chess, long division, memorizing, being sweet and polite, getting compliments from grown-ups... Rose was quite ready to swear that Ron was a genius, just as



she was ready to swear that his little sister was the exact antonym of genius.

“Neville? Aren’t you going to bite off Rose’s head?” Draco asked, looking hopeful.

Neville half-smiled. “Not this time. I’m just... thinking.”

“That’s bad,” Rose told him seriously. “When Ron thinks he’s on a major breakthrough. When Ginny and Hannah think, it spells disaster for the planet. When I think everyone makes sarcastic comments about my brains – or lack thereof. When Draco thinks, we all take shelter in the catacombs. But when you think... we do all that together.”

Neville chuckled lightly and batted his hand lazily at her. “Tell me the whole story then, if you’re so desperate for a few quotable quips.”

Rose was quite eager to enumerate her brilliance and bravery, and so she began at once, giving them a blow-by-blow, highly colored version of the truth, in which she starred as the Savior of the Universe armed with a teeny-tiny music box against the Forces of Evil and where Smith starred as the cowardly, cringing, whimpering sidekick whom she had to rescue several times – each time by the skin of her teeth, of course, and where he was highly ungrateful after each rescue mission.

“And you expect us to believe that?” Draco forgot all his earlier training and snorted almost as eloquently – and vulgarly – as Rose.

“It’s the truth and if you don’t believe it you can go ask Smith,” Rose told him. “I bet he knows a charm to turn you violet too. He turned you pig-pink the first day of term, so of course, he should know a few more coloring charms by now.”

“Such a sweet, lovely, naïve young lady,” Draco sneered, “It’s a wonder nobody’s thought of throwing you off the Astronomy Tower yet.”

“Oh they have,” Rose assured him. “But they’re all too devastated by my charm to execute their plans of homicide. Now it’s your turn to say

something brilliant that shall shine in our memories for the rest of our lives, Neville.”

“You two are pricks,” Neville said, looking irritated. “And I’m only being polite there.” He rubbed his forehead tiredly, “So the music box makes Fluffy go to sleep. Kudos to you, Rose, for telling me that. I could have figured that out myself.”

“You wouldn’t have known for sure. Figuring something out isn’t the same as *knowing* it.”

Neville laughed suddenly, and very loudly. He was still laughing when the bell rang a few seconds later, and Draco and Rose – both very concerned – had to thump him hard on the back several times before he regained his faculties of speech.

“You,” he finally gasped out, “Are the only clever person who can make everyone else think they’re completely daft.” He squeezed her hand and smiled like goofily like he used to do when he was seven and it was his birthday or Christmas. That smile completely altered his appearance – his brown eyes were bright and soft again, his smile spread wide across his face, crinkling the corners of his lips and eyes, stretching through his freckled cheeks – and he looked utterly sweet and chocolate-boxy and boy-next-doorish once again.

Rose realized with a sharp jolt that, throughout the last few months – September to February – he’d changed imperceptibly but changed he had, in front of her eyes, and she hadn’t even noticed it. When his smile fell a while later, she studied his face minutely – making sure he didn’t notice she was checking him out – making several discoveries that startled and bewildered her. He looked so... tired. Not in a missed-a-night-or-two-over-homework way, but in a way that practically screamed – if you compared his face now to his face before school had started – that he’d been through a lot of pressure, anxiety and unexpected revelations.

His forehead was creased with a few light wrinkles, his eyes were duller than before, and his expression... it reminded her uncannily of a lamb being brought out for slaughter.

## ***Mother and Daughter***

*“Cissy, your own sister? You wouldn’t –”*

*“There is nothing I wouldn’t do any more!”*

## **Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, British Edition, Pg 27**

With a sharp ricocheting *crack* like the slash of a whip, a woman Apparated in front of a row of stately mansions. It was an old street; old money had definitely gone into the making of the quaintly Georgian townhouses with their lush, landscaped lawns, just as definitely as new money had helped to keep these pretty houses and lawns in their excellent condition. The woman hardly glanced to admire the beauty and the grace posed temptingly in front of her and set off with long strides, like a man’s, for the largest and most magnificent house, the one at the very end of the row.

There was a doorkeeper – a house-elf, really, cleverly disguised to resemble a human being so as not to excite the suspicions of the Muggles who lived on the row – at the tall iron gates, carved so well (or magically) that they resembled black lace. The doorkeeper bowed low as soon as it saw the woman and, with a creak, as though the gates hadn’t been opened in a long time, they swung wide. The woman hurried up the long gravel drive without a glance at the house-elves tending the lawns. The front doors opened just as she stepped onto the verandah encircling the ground floor of the house and she glided into the pleasantly warm marble foyer.

“Miss Bella,” a voice squeaked and the two house-elves stationed in the foyers hurried to remove her cloak and bow sycophantically.

“Where is your mistress?” Miss Bella snapped, lightly fingering the heavy golden locket that hung at her pale throat.

“In her boudoir, Miss,” the other house-elf squeaked. “Mistress, she not well...”

*“Imbecile,”* Miss Bella breathed and out flashed her wand and the house-elf retreated, yelping in pain. “She’s not well, is she? Well, she’ll be even worse off after I’m done with her.”

Muttering to herself, she climbed up the staircase and hurried down the long hallway to the lady of the house's boudoir. It was a fragile, delicate sort of room, entirely upholstered in pale pink – Narcissa's favorite color and incidentally, her mother's – sunny and airy, full of expensive knick-knacks and fresh flowers and coffee-table tomes... the sort of thing you would expect from Druella Black. The lady herself was stretched across a rose-pink settee, staring dreamily out of the window, a book lying forgotten in her lap.

Bellatrix Lestrange dragged a frail chair across the room and planted it firmly in front of the settee, effectively blocking her mother's view of the gardens from the window. She straddled the chair, enjoying the momentary look of horror that flitted across her mother's face at this breach of proper posture, and leaned forwards, waiting for her mother to make the first move.

"You happen to be in my way, Bellatrix," Druella said calmly. "Kindly seat yourself in a more civilized fashion."

Bellatrix laughed and lazily twirled her wand in her long fingers, before pointing it at her mother's forehead. "You know why I'm here, Mother Dearest."

There was the barest flash of emotion in Druella's blue eyes. But her voice was as serene and empty as ever as she replied, "Yes. I do know." She nodded lightly towards the golden locket.

"Auntie," Bellatrix said. "Auntie didn't have much time. She gave me this and told me to ask you everything, said you'd know."

"A sad loss for you," Druella said quietly. "She was more a mother to you than I ever could be. We are entirely alien, Bellatrix. I've often wondered, really, how I could have had such a daughter."

"You always preferred Cissy," Bellatrix shrugged, "And even *her* to me. I don't hold a grudge against you for that. But that's not what I came here to discuss, I..."

"No," her mother said quietly, sitting up a little straighter. "I refuse to tell you." Her eyes flickered with amusement, even though her face was as impassively beautiful as ever. "I know what you can do,

Bellatrix, and I know what you can't. You'll never obtain a shard of information from *me*, try as you may."

Her daughter's lips twitched in fury and her face was very white. Her wand quivered threateningly and she hissed, "You have *no* idea what I can do, there's nothing I wouldn't do anymore..."

But Druella only laughed, and Bellatrix was reminded vividly of glass shattering. "Bella, your own mother? You wouldn't –"

Her mouth opened in a soundless gasp as she was thrown off her settee with a violence that made her skid several feet and slam into a wall. A delicate picture of a rosy-cheeked angel trembled above her.

"*Nothing* I wouldn't do," Bellatrix repeated, every bit as pale as her mother. She rose from her chair, wand drawn. Druella lay quite still underneath the picture of the angel, eyes shut, and for a stomach-lurching moment Bellatrix wondered whether she had killed her mother. Then her long lashes trembled and she half-dragged herself into a sitting position against the wall. She fumbled for a moment, and then her own wand was in her trembling fingers.

Bellatrix stood ready, she expected a duel now. A duel with her own mother.

But to her surprise, Druella threw the wand away. It fell soundlessly on the thick rose-bedecked carpet, in front of Bellatrix's feet. "No," her mother whispered, looking very ill, "No, Bellatrix, I won't fight you. Not one of my own daughters." She clutched the wall and rose unsteadily. "Kill me if you will. If you can."

Bellatrix raised her wand and looked into her mother's blue eyes. "*Avada Kedavra*," she whispered.

Nothing happened and she knew why. *You have to mean an Unforgivable Curse to make it work. Without the will, there is no way.* Her master had told her that. She would never be able to kill her mother. Or her sisters.

“Why?” she screamed, feeling like a thwarted child once again. Why was the world against her? What had she done to deserve this? *What?* “Why won’t you tell me?”

“You’ll die if I tell you,” her mother said quietly. “You’ll understand. Then you’ll think. And then you will search for *him*.”

“And I’m bound by an Unbreakable Vow,” Bellatrix breathed, bitterness in each syllable. “Lucius and Rodolphus –”

“They did well,” her mother snarled in a rare show of naked passion. “Why should they let a madwoman – for that is what you have become, Bellatrix – roam wild? Why should they permit you to run amok and ruin whatever chances they, and their children, might have for some semblance of a normal life? The past is behind us, Bellatrix! Put it behind you.”

“I won’t,” she cried passionately. “As long as I live, I’ll never put it behind me. Never!”

“Then you won’t have much time to live, either!” her mother hissed. “And you won’t be received in the darkest circles of hell, either, Bellatrix Lestrange. Your crimes –”

“I have never committed a crime,” Bellatrix said flatly. “I acted according to what I was taught to believe. I am loyal, Mother, and one day I shall have my reward, my glory for I was the only one...”

“You are supremely deranged,” Druella whispered. “Were you ever taught to murder? Oh don’t tell me, my dear daughter, of course you were... from one who –”

“Is better than you could aspire to be,” her daughter said quietly, her eyes locked with her mother’s, concentrating hard.

Druella gave a sharp cry of pain and recoiled back, instantly fortifying her mind with Occlumency against her daughter’s Legilimency. But Bellatrix had her information: Kreacher.

“Good day, mother,” she whispered, swishing away. Her mother was silent, shaking in fury. But just as she reached the doorway, her

mother's voice called out, "Goodbye, Bellatrix." There was a ringing note of finality about it, and Bellatrix turned around to see her mother for the last time, pale and trembling with emotion underneath the picture of the rosy-cheeked angel in the pink boudoir. For a moment, she longed to fling herself into her mother's arms as she'd done when she was a little girl. But then the moment passed, and she walked down the hallway, head held erect.

Her mother did not come.

**000**

"Miss Bella!" Kreacher squeaked in pleasure and hurled himself on Bellatrix's knees. Bellatrix stroked his bald head absently, with unusual tenderness. She was thinking of her mother but, with an effort, she pulled herself back. She took off the necklace Aunt Walburga had given her and dangled it in front of Kreacher's snout. True to form, his pale eyes widened with surprise and he recoiled.

"I thought you'd recognize this," she murmured, sitting down cross-legged on the floor. "Can you tell me more about this?"

Kreacher trembled and shook his head, tears in his eyes.

"Very well," she said quietly. "I'm sorry to have to do this to such a faithful servant, really I am... but the Cruciatus Curse might loosen your tongue." She raised her wand.

Kreacher shook his head, crying silently. "Ah, Miss Bella," he whispered. "I is forbidden."

"Your mistress forbade you?"

Kreacher shook his head, trembling. "Master Regulus," he whispered and instinctively, Bellatrix grabbed him before he could bring any harm upon himself.

"But your new mistress knows," Bellatrix said. "You must have told her. Why not me?"

Slowly, haltingly – with many pauses during which Bellatrix had to rescue him – he told her. Master Regulus had forbidden him from telling ‘any of the family’. Mistress Druella was not ‘of the family’, not by blood. Kreacher had told her, without having to punish himself. Mistress Druella had told Mistress Walburga a month or so before she died, to set her mind at rest about her son. Kreacher could not tell Miss Bella anymore, no, he was sorry, but he could not...

Bellatrix sighed. “Sit down and shut up, Kreacher. Let me think for a moment.” She frowned for a moment, deep in concentration. Then an idea struck her, though it would be risky, very risky. “Run, get me a tureen from the kitchen, it’ll serve as a Pensieve since your mistress has none.”

Kreacher did as she bid and placed it in front of her, eyes shining with reverence for her. “This won’t hurt,” Bellatrix said, though she wasn’t sure. “Just relax and... and think of Master Regulus and whatever it is you told your mistress. And erm, close your eyes too, I hate house-elf eyes.” Kreacher obediently shut his eyes and breathed in and out quite calmly. Gently, Bellatrix placed her wand on his temples, muttering under her breath. Then she drew back her wand and a filmy substance, purplish – it would have been silvery in humans – substance floated from Kreacher’s temples. She led it into the tureen and flicked her wand sharply to stop the flow of thoughts.

Kreacher looked pale and clammy. The spell wouldn’t work as well on house-elves, as on humans, but it was the only thing Bellatrix could do. “Wait for me,” she ordered him, and gingerly touched the gluey purple substance inside the tureen. The hallway gave an almighty lurch and she was thrown forwards and pitched headfirst into the substance, falling through a black, icy coldness, sucked into a dark whirlpool...

And suddenly, she was back in the hallway once again, sitting cross-legged next to dull-eyed Kreacher, everything the same as before, as if nothing had happened, as if... Tears glimmered on her eyelashes and she roughly wiped them off, her voice constricting with the tight lump in her throat as she told the house-elf, “Th-thank you. You... you, did the best you could. Master Regulus would have been proud.”



She conjured a delicate lace handkerchief from the tip of her wand and buried her face in it for a few moments. The fit passed, no tears drenched the handkerchief, and she was quite calm and collected, not even pale or dull-eyed, when she emerged again. Her voice was businesslike as she pulled off her golden chain and flung it at Kreacher's face.

"This is the same?" she demanded, showing him the heavy golden locket, embedded with tiny, glinting emeralds arranged in an S-shape.

Kreacher nodded mutely. Bellatrix's question had not gone *against* Regulus' order, but all the same, it couldn't actually be considered safely ensconced according to the terms of the command. A simple nod was the safest possible answer.

Bellatrix sucked in her lip sharply and mused aloud, more to herself than to Kreacher. "How did he find out? What were his motives? *Why* did he..." Her lips quivered and she bit them hard. What had possessed Regulus to kill himself and defy the Dark Lord? Why had *he* of all people, the Black heir, so well-connected and so well-established, gone the way of... well, gone the way of someone like his older brother?

*He was a child*, she told herself. *Hardly eighteen when he... well, he was always a little delicate, weak-willed... He fainted after our first raid, didn't he? And he didn't like blood, always threw up afterwards... of course I'm not trying to justify him, but well...he was only a little boy. Must have got in with the wrong crowd and well... he was too young to know right from wrong. If only he'd talked to me or anybody at all, he wouldn't have had...*

Overwhelming pity for her little cousin and razor-sharp grief at his loss, those were the emotions she felt, raw and passionate. She hadn't felt like this even at his funeral thirteen years ago, the funeral where there'd been no body to bury, where Uncle Orion had tottered, ashen-faced like an old man and Aunt Walburga had stood by the grave for eighteen hours, mute and statue-like, where she and Narcissa had clasped each other's hands and wept like children into their long hair, their heartache nothing compared to Regulus' parents'.

Then she hadn't known the truth. She wondered vaguely how many years her mother had kept the truth to herself, after Kreacher had told her, content to let Walburga and Bellatrix wallow in the darkness. A flash of rage against the woman who'd given birth to her flared through her, and she had half-a-mind to run up the stairs and see if she could not kill her.

"Miss Bella?" Kreacher muttered tentatively and handed her necklace.

She fingered the emeralds on the locket lightly, and suddenly a plan was forming in her mind. Borgin and Burke's... the library at Lockwind... Lucius' subterranean caverns... the vault at Gringotts'... she needed to be there, to find out everything. And when she knew what she had to, she'd make Lucius and Rodolphus take the Unbreakable Vow off her. She didn't know how – you couldn't be put under or out of an Unbreakable Vow whilst under the Unforgivable Curses – yet, but she would soon. That was another something to worry about, but she was glad, fiercely happy, that there was finally something to worry about again, a puzzle with an answer that she might actually find, without having to grope in the dark for years...

She rose and smiled with pleasure at Kreacher. "You've been very helpful. Thank you, again."

She strode down the hallway, threw on her cloak and down the graveled path, until she was at the gates. She took one last look at the mansion where she and her sisters had grown up, and then, with a peculiar feeling of nostalgia, knowing she might never see it again – Mother wouldn't care for her presence any longer – she turned her back on it and walked away, her long cloak whipping after her.

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April 29th, 1991

*Dear Mum,*

*I know I wrote a letter for you and Daddy and Uncle Padfoot together yesterday – nothing much is happening here right now, so I can't*

really write personalized letters for all of you, don't feel bad about it. So, you might wonder why I'm writing to you again. No, don't get that expression on your face; don't rummage around for a spare bit of parchment Harry hasn't drawn on yet and a quill. Nothing tragic or scary or bad or wrong or anything else that I can be held accountable for has happened – yet.

Um, yes, about the look that's just appeared on your face after reading the 'yet', I'm sure it can't be good for the baby. So please, wipe it off.

We're all quite fine and peachy and dandy and loads of other Victorian-esque expressions up at Hogwarts. Ron and Hermione Granger – remember that Muggle-born girl with bushy hair and a hand that's permanently raised in class, I told you about? – have formed an Advanced Study-and-Homework Group and are busy making revision timetables for our June exams already. Draco is perfecting his smirk techniques, Hannah is swooning after Cedric Diggory – well, half the female population in school, and some of the males are too, so that doesn't really count – and I'm trying to work out the Wronski Feint without decapitating myself (yeah, I'm still hopeful).

You're wondering why I haven't mentioned Neville yet. Well, um, that's the thing. Neville Harfang Longbottom who used to spend his free time showing off his scar and sketching himself with Playwitch models at his feet. That's the important thing: used to.

Of late, I've been having this... I don't know, what you'd call it – woman's intuition (even though Millicent told me I'm roughly five years short of womanhood), sixth sense, years spent analyzing Neville going through his moods, whatever. I told you about him spending a lot of time with Quirrell and you told me that was 'cause Quirrell was fascinated with Neville's Boy-Who-Lived aura and they have some common vibe – and you also gave me a load of rubbish about Winston Churchill's brilliance too.

Well Churchill is anything but brilliant – he reads like some of the Regency romances Uncle Padfoot pretends he doesn't stuff under his bed – and Neville is anything but Neville nowadays. He's different. I mean, he doesn't say or do anything different, but he just looks – I

*dunno – really tired nowadays. Not in a I-missed-a-night-over-homework way, but in the way Daddy gets after he spends a few months tracking down a hard case – world-weary, I mean, like you say, like he’s always thinking of something that makes him worry a lot, like he’s under a lot of pressure.*

*He doesn’t smile that much, he’s nearly as quiet as Ron in one of his sulk-fits – only it’s weird because Neville doesn’t usually sulk and now, he has nothing to sulk about. He stares off into space all the time and looks dreamy and thoughtful. Ok, so everyone – except me, you’ll say – does that sometimes. SOMETIMES. Neville’s doing it all the time. And he’s stopped doodling Playwitch models on his class notes too – he now sketches skulls and snakes and swords, most of it in bright green ink with lots of details that would make you sick.*

*And he’s forgetting a lot of things now. No, not things you’d expect him to forget like homework or test dates or incantations. Things you don’t remember until they come up and then you start ‘reminiscing’ about them and then forget for another couple of things – trips-down-memory-lane things.*

*Like we were all just sitting in the Common Room after I’d finished Quidditch Practice one day and the subject of jobs came up. Draco told us he’s going to go ‘into the family business’ when he’s of age – and I was smart enough not to ask questions about the family business too – and then I told him I want to tame Chinese Fireballs or play for the Appleby Arrows when I grow up. Then Draco asked Neville and he stared froggishly – like Smiley does when he’s molting – for a couple of seconds like he was trying to remember something and then finally said in a weirdish voice, “I’m not sure. I haven’t decided yet.”*

*And **that’s** the purest, most unblemished form of tripe and hogwash I’ve ever heard of. Neville decided what he wanted to be the day You-Know-Who scarred him for life (more or less, he’s known since he was six at least): Head of the Department of Mysteries and finally Minister for Magic. No ifs and buts and if-you-pleases about it.*

*And he’s forgetting loads of other ‘little things’ too: like the time I was seven and the Incident with the Car that we pretend never happened*

*or when I accidentally threw Hannah over the roof or when he fell seventy-feet from a broomstick when we were nine and broke his left arm. I mention stuff like that sometimes – to test him, you see – and he doesn't remember! He just blinks at me and frowns like he's trying to remember, but he finally ends up and says that it might be true or it might not, and that's entirely up to my conscience.*

*As if I'm lying! He's being sinical of course – is that the right spelling? – and so I try to laugh it off, but it just stays in my mind and well... I don't feel so good about it. In fact, I feel very bad – nervous, you might say – about it. It's ominous.*

*I'm sorry this is so long, but everything's just spilling out and I have to tell you. You always know what to do about stuff like this.*

*With Love,*

*Rose*

*PS: Have you decided on a name for the baby yet?*

*PPS: When's the baby's birthday?*

*PPPS: I wrote the last two postscripts with my left hand. I'm practicing writing with my left hand in History class, so that one day I'll be ambidextrous (I know what that means). I'm getting very good at it too.*

*Love Again,*

*R.I.P*

Lily put down her daughter's letter and took up her cup of tea. She was as devoted to her cup of tea – preferably full of thick cream and lots of sugar, which she in devoured in guilty pleasure – as Sirius was addicted to his mug of coffee. Absently, she summoned a ream of parchment and her favorite quill, an extravagant peacock-feather Rose had insisted on buying her with her own pocket-money (aka the funds she garnered from her godfather).

"Vanessa is a nice name too," Harry said conversationally. It was eight o'clock at night and they were both in the kitchen, waiting up for

James – Lily enjoying her tea and writing her weekly article for *Potent Potions* and Harry cross-legged at her feet, researching baby names for his unborn sibling. Lily was very fond of *1000 Baby Names*, the book they'd bought from a tiny Muggle shop the first time she'd been pregnant.

It had started raining suddenly, spoiling their romantic little picnic, and they'd run into the small shop, laughing, pelting each other with flowers from the bouquet James had conjured for her. They'd been in the middle of a war, two idealistic nineteen-year-olds with figures that made her sigh now, crazily in love with each other, naïve and optimistic about the world, frightened and exhilarated with the thought of their baby.

Her eyes had lighted quite suddenly on the book and they'd bought it immediately, spent hours later pondering over the names and meanings inside, feeling and weighing each carefully, minutely and very, very seriously. They'd finally decided on two good, old-fashioned names that both were fond of: Harry for a boy (they both liked the sound of the name) and Rose for a girl (it fit into the floral tradition of her family and was beautiful as well). The middle names had been easy, James after Lily's father (who'd ironically borne the same name as her husband) and Iris after her mother (who'd died of cancer before she turned thirteen).

Of course they'd forgotten that if they named the girl Rose Iris, her initials would add up to R.I.P – Rest in Peace, as Sirius had phrased it soon after they'd fondly bestowed it on the cherubic, emerald-eyed baby girl, roaring with laughter. It was too late then, to change it and they saw no point in changing it. They were *that* naïve. R.I.P, the initials of a child born in the middle of a war, whose parents were both active fighters. It hadn't struck her as ironic then, but it did, now.

"So is Valeria," Harry chatted along, looking up to his mother for her approval. He'd bitten Liam Turner's nose that day, so of course he was in a very angelic mood and genial temper now, trying to get on her good side again. "I don't like Veronica that much, but Vivian is a very, very nice name too. You won't have to change the name if it's a boy or girl – Vivian works for both."

"No son of mine is being named Vivian," Lily told him sternly, catching the quill and parchment as they zoomed towards her from the bedroom. "What would you do if we'd named you Vivian? Been the joke of the playground, no doubt."

"You can ask Rose if she likes Vanessa more or Vivian," Harry said. "Vanessa means butterfly. I don't like that but it sounds really nice." He was totally in earnest.

Lily smiled. "Why are you only checking out the V-section? And what if it's a boy?"

"If it's a boy you're going to name it Serpantium Aurelius Jack Rococo," Harry said seriously.

Lily bit her lips to keep from shrieking in laughter. "I'll consider the Jack part," she said gravely, "But it's simply a crime to name any child, no matter how much he sin, Serpantium Aurelius Rococo. Don't even try that on your own children if you want to die safely in bed."

"I don't like children," Harry said coolly. "I have enough to do trying to manage Rose and Uncle Padfoot."

"Well said," Lily chuckled. "I'll check with Rose which name she likes: your preferences are Vanessa and Vivian, right?"

Harry nodded, and turned a page. "I bet you're going to name it Daisy or Tulip or something flowery if it's a girl," he said sulkily. "Everyone in your family has a flowery name. Iris, Petunia, Lily, Rose..."

"I promise it won't be Tulip," Lily said, chewing her quill absently. "Though Daisy *does* have a nice ring to it..." She chuckled at the look of horror on her son's face.

*Dear Rose,*

*I wondered why the letters in your postscript were so untidy – they looked like Harry's. The Healers say the baby will arrive on the 5th of June – though of course they might be off track. We expected you on the 2nd of August and Harry on the 29th of November. Harry wants me to check with you if you like the name 'Vanessa' more, or 'Vivian'.*

*If it's a boy, he expects it to be named Serpantium Aurelius Jack Rococo.*

*No, you are not allowed to send him a Howler. He's seven. When you were seven, you named your pink stuffed elephant Gonorrhea.*

*I understand that you're very worried about Neville. I can even sympathize with you. When I was a little older than you, around fifteen, my best friend and I had a very public split-up over a matter of – shall we say – misplaced sympathies. It had something – no, a lot of things – to do with the way we thought and viewed the world, and about the war of course. Everything was somehow connected to the war when I was in school. I hope that never happens to you – it hurts.*

*Well, that happened a long time ago, and recently – very recently – we've come to a messy patch-up about the matter. We're not best friends, we're hardly friends now, but we're working towards reconciliation. Don't mention anything of this to your father, though, or Uncle Padfoot – they won't understand and you aren't old enough (I'm sorry that I still have to say this to you) to know more about this.*

*Well, what I want to say is that Neville might be attaining puberty faster than you. He's starting to think about the world differently, and maybe he's thinking about the things in Quirrell's books, about concepts and ideas you still don't care about yet. Love, hate, prejudice, grayness... that sort of thing that you're bored by. So he might seem to be very dreamy nowadays. Give him space to breathe, Rose, let him be himself for a while. You're best friends, but that doesn't mean you have to stick to him like Spellotape.*

*As for him forgetting things – well, that might be his way of growing up. Frankly, I still haven't managed to work out the intricacies of the minds of pre-pubescent boys yet. I can figure out about men and adolescents and little boys like Harry – please don't tell him I called him little – but for boys between nine and fourteen... well, I can only hazard a very hazy guess at best. He might just be pretending to fend off more queries or because he likes to do that now – for his own reasons, which might seem very plausible to him and not to the rest of the world.*



*If it bothers you very much, come out clearly to him. It's best to do that, really. Being frank and honest – except to the point of brutality of course – works wonders with boys. Try to be as kind and gentle to him as you can – he seems like he needs that. Please don't owl his grandmother – I have a feeling she won't understand – but you can talk to Ron. He might understand.*

*Your father and Uncle Padfoot send their love. They're nearly as busy – you'd probably doubt me if I said they're even busier – as you are. The Ten-Yearly International Council of Warlocks convenes at the Ministry of Magic – the first time in two hundred years it's ever sat at London – the day your exams finish, so of course everyone at the MoM is very busy now, tidying things up, finishing all the paper-work etc. Don't take the absence of letters from them too much to heart.*

*I hope you manage to patch things up with Neville. You have my luck on your side, and this box of Sugar Quills too – your friend Draco seems to go through them even faster than Harry does!*

*With Love,*

*Mum*

*PS: Its spelt 'reminiscing', not 'reminscing' and 'cynical' not 'sinical'.*

## ***The Debut of the Snidget***

*“Love is stronger than death even though it can't stop death from happening, but no matter how hard death tries it can't separate people from love. It can't take away our memories either. In the end, life is stronger than death.”*

Harry James Potter hated missing school. Especially because of a cold. Especially-particularly because of a cold at the beginning of June.

It was frankly unreasonable, unnatural, and ungodly to catch a cold in the middle of summer. Why were they called colds if you caught them when it was so nice and warm that you were dying to go to school and see pretty Miss March – their first-grade teacher – and bash up Liam Turner and sample Susie Benteen's special cookies and set up lemonade booths to collect money for charity and go to the Cooper twins' pool party?

It was just so *unfaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiir* – as he'd shouted to his parents at the top of his lungs on Wednesday when they'd taken his temperature and cast the verdict: No, dear, you're running a temperature of a hundred-and-three degrees, you shouldn't even be thinking about a pool party, you'd be better off in bed with a steaming mug of hot chocolate and...

Now it was Thursday night and his temperature had dropped to ninety-nine degrees – a good sign according to Mummy who had brightly suggested that he might be well enough to attend school on Monday. This suggestion – like all his parents' comments since their refusal to allow him to attend the party – had been met by a stony silence and a firmly jutting out lip. Harry knew how to sulk – with a passion, as Uncle Padfoot had unnecessarily added, chuckling and swiping at his messy auburn hair.

“Are you still mad at me?” Mummy smiled, entering his bedroom at nine – ten minutes before his bedtime – with chocolate milk and a cookie.

Harry looked up from *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, shot her a glare and painstakingly turned a page

of the book. When he had been smaller and he'd just lost a tantrum with Rose – which happened thrice in a day on average, a very low number considering her volatile temper and tolerance threshold for brats other than herself – he used to lock up his bedroom and curl up underneath his blankets with a book. Consequently, his reading level was far higher than that of most seven-year-olds.

“What good will sulking do?” Mummy asked gently, setting the milk and cookie on his pastel blue bedside table. Harry's bedroom was color-coordinated in ice-blue, while Rose's was in flame-red. Dad said that it matched their personalities. “You really were very sick that day, pumpkin. Weren't you?”

“No,” he snapped defiantly, snatching up his milk and slurping it down noisily. He glared at her through his hazel eyes. Rose was always called her father's daughter while Harry was always mamma's boy. That had a lot to do with looks – Rose was a female James in miniature with her mother's eyes while Harry resembled his mother almost uncannily, but with his father's eyes – but it had equally much to do with their personalities. Fire and Ice. Very few people thought of the word ‘ice’ whilst considering bright, warm, cheerful Lily Potter, but ice didn't represent coldness alone. It stood for sharpness, strength, prudent reserve, all hidden beneath a deceptively fragile exterior. It was more effective than fire.

Harry grabbed his cookie and chomped it up, scattering crumbs over his blanket. Mummy frowned at him and grudgingly, he swept the crumbs off.

“Tomorrow's the 5th of June,” she said softly, stroking her drooping stomach. She let out a deep breath and ruffled her son's hair gently – until he pushed her off. She smiled. “Remember the drill?”

“Anything might happen tomorrow,” he recited. “When you and Dad Apparate to St. Brunhilda's Maternity Centre I have to go straight to Miss Bagshot's house, tell her that you're entering labor and then wait there. I have to listen to whatever she says, not mess up her house and be patient. I hate you.”

“That goes without saying,” Mummy said dryly. “What about Dad?”

"I hate him even more." Dad was the one who'd finally lost patience with Harry's screams with Wednesday and spanked him. Mummy hardly ever spanked them – even Rose who deserved it most of the time.

"Rose?"

"I like her as much as I like watermelons." He was allergic to watermelons.

"Well," Mummy sighed. "Is there anyone in this world – aside from Miss March and Hannah Abbott of course – that you love ungrudgingly, unconditionally and whole-heartedly?"

"What?"

Mummy explained what 'ungrudgingly, unconditionally' meant and Harry thought about it for a moment before shaking his head and saying 'no' very decidedly.

"I suppose love goes by season," Mummy said absently, picking up his empty glass of milk. "It's never unconditional, is it?" She looked like she was talking to herself, stroking her long auburn hair, glowing emerald eyes pensive. She kissed Harry's forehead, murmured, "Sleep well," closed the lights and then walked out of the room, frost blue carpet muffling her footsteps.

Harry put away *The Chronicles of Narnia* and soon, blankets up to his pointed chin, he drifted off to sleep.

He woke up with a start when he felt someone shaking him roughly. He grunted and blinked open his eyes to see his father standing before him, glasses and cloak askew. Mummy, very pale and clutching her stomach, appeared behind him, Harry's clothes hanging on her arm.

"It's time," Dad murmured, haphazardly shoving the half-asleep seven-year-old into his outfit. "Here – Harry, do you..."

"Miss Bagshot... be a good boy... wait," he mumbled, "Dad those are my jeans, not my shirt..."

“Here,” Mummy muttered, zipping Harry into his clothes neatly in a few seconds. She kissed his cheeks and squeezed him tightly before letting go, a warm smile on her face. She held Dad’s hand and together they Apparated to St. Brunhilda’s Maternity Centre where most witches had their babies nowadays. It was either the modern, cheerful convenience of St. Brunhilda’s or follow tradition like your great-great grandmother and have your child in the discomfort of your own mansion with distressed family members and dire-voiced midwives hovering over you.

Harry blinked dazedly at the spot they’d been at before walking out of his room, climbing down the stairs and getting out of the house. After he’d shut the door, he trembled as he felt the enchantments in the house clinking into place – the safety measures his parents had put into place years ago, remnants of the War – and shutting the house to intruders.

It was just before sunrise. The sky was a faded lemonade-yellow and here and there tiny, gemlike stars twinkled down at him. He crossed the street, the cool dawn breeze wafting across his face pleasantly, and banged on Miss Bagshot’s door. He had to wait a good ten minutes while the fat, ancient lady grunted awake, threw on a dressing gown (Uncle Sirius swore that she shopped for lingerie from Victoria’s Secret and thus, could never open the door in her nightgown) and hobbled down the stairs, leaning heavily on her cane.

“Mummy’s in labor,” he said promptly as the door creaked open.

“Swee’ Morgan,” Miss Bagshot murmured, tugging Harry in. “C’min, child, c’min. Sure it ain’t a time for children to be out, go up t’ bed, boy. There now, go.”

Harry was only too glad to scramble up the stairs of Miss Bagshot’s neat, prim-and-proper cottage and tumble into her tiny guest-room that always smelled pleasantly of dried roses and peppermint. When he woke up again, it was high noon and Miss Bagshot’s elf, Zippy, had arrived with a breakfast-tray which he wasted no time in devouring.

“Mistress sends her compliments and wishes young Master to amuse himself as he wishes. Young Master’s parents are still at St.

Brunhilda's with Master Black as well," Zippy smiled brightly and bowed, exiting with Harry's empty breakfast tray.

Harry yawned, wriggled and rolled over in bed, trying to fall asleep but failing. He sneezed a few times, yawned again and then stretched languorously out of bed, not feeling up to the exertion of going down. The lower quarters were the exclusive property of Miss Bagshot's pet rabbits that ran wild there. Harry had a holy terror of rodents in any form – which was exclusively Rose's fault, after the prank she'd played on him when he was three and she eight.

His eyes fell on a heavy black tome with an embossed golden title that proclaimed it to be *Nature's Nobility*, on the quaintly carved bedside table and he hefted it onto his bed. He liked heavy books – reading them, even though he didn't understand a lot of the words in them, made him feel important.

*Nature's Nobility*

*Genealogy of the Lineage of Purebloods of the British Isles, Ireland and Scotland*

*Edition CXII: Compilations by Walburga Black (including additional charts, lines now extinct in the male line continued in the female, maps and background information)*

He opened it to a random page near the beginning and a long chart – at least a foot long – unfolded itself from the page and spread across the blankets. It looked like a family tree, with names written in curly black and silver letters and dates underneath them. There were little asterisks next to most of the names with appropriate page numbers listed next to them. The names of males were in silver, while those of females were in black.

*The House of Lestrangle (7th cont. PAGE 119)*

**Nunquam non Paratus**

Harry's eyes automatically fell to the bottom of the long chart. According to the chart, a Romulus was the youngest member of the extended family, born in 1981. His parents were a Rabastan, born in

1955, and a Lyra Rookwood, born in 1952. To the left of Rabastan's name stretched those of his siblings: Cassiopeia (1953) married to Gawain Greengrass (1942-1982) with a daughter Daphne (1980), Carina (1953-1980) married to Theodore Nott (1933) with a son of the same name (1980) and Rodolphus (1942) married to Bellatrix Black (1951).

Harry wondered whether Daphne and Theodore were in Rose's year – they probably were, Rose was born in 1980 too. It was pretty cool to have your name on a book, even if it was only on a chart. There were multiple asterisk marks next to the names of Rodolphus, Bellatrix, Theodore the Elder – but only one next to that of Carina Nott, Cassiopeia's twin sister, who'd died pretty young, when she was only 27, the year she'd had her son. Curious, Harry flipped to Page 1045 and ran his finger down the long column of names until he came to Carina Nott's name.

*Carina Lestrange Nott:* Loyal supporter to the Dark Lord until her death at the hand of Sirius Black (cert.) Second female Death Eater – apart from her sister-in-law and close companion, Bellatrix Black and Alecko Carrows – she was notorious for her research and work in the field of Wand-Lore. A few months before her demise, she, her brother Rodolphus and husband had just undertaken a project into the nature of Horcruxes – a project cancelled after her untimely death.

*She was evil,* Harry decided calmly and decidedly. All Death Eaters were evil. Of course Uncle Padfoot was right to kill her. Death Eaters did horrible things – they murdered people and sabotaged stuff (though he didn't know what that meant – Dad had just told him once) – and they deserved to die. You had to kill bad people.

Bored, Harry flipped to the Table of Contents – an index which stretched for a whooping seventeen pages. There was an Introduction, a Bibliography, Sources, Extra Notes, Condensed Material at the beginning. After that, the first family on the list was the Peverells – on Page 60.

Harry flipped there and a foot-long chart unfolded itself from the book. It was very complex, and the family must have been very dysfunctional – plenty of first cousins married each other and even a

few brothers and sisters. The names on the page were very long – *Marcellus Julius Nigellus Peverellus*, *Cassia Quinta Minor Peverellus* – and a lot of the dates were in B.C. The chart became sketchy about dates of birth and date around the end – roughly for a few hundred years, between the late third century AD and the ninth century AD – and on the second page.

On the third page, at the very beginning, there was SALAZAR SLYTHERIN proclaimed in thick letters – with plenty of asterisks next to his name – who had married three Peverell sisters and had twelve children. Only two sons and a daughter had survived beyond the age of four. The elder – with an asterisk mark next to his name and two illegitimate sons – had died when he was in his early twenties. The younger son had married his half-sister and had a daughter, Elektra Slytherin – when her mother was eleven – who'd married one of her second cousins and entered the Peverell line again. She had three sons: Antioch, Cadmus and Ignotus.

Harry traced the line of the Antioch and Ignotus, shocked and deeply interested at the extremely close interrelationships between them all and the age at which most of them had children. Family trees were *wonderful*. Soon, around the middle of the fourth page Antioch and Ignotus' lines were the only branches of the once extensive Peverell family left. Around the fifth page, in the late sixteenth century Ignotus' line petered off into that of the Potters – a footnote indicated the page where the Genealogy of the Potters was displayed.

Harry was fascinated, but diligently, he checked the end of the Peverell Line before heading off to research the Potters. It ended in the early part of the twentieth century, with a certain Marvolo Gaunt who married the last of the Peverell daughters and had two children: Morfin and Merope. According to the book, both had died childless (though there was a question-mark in place of Merope's date of death).

Harry flipped over to the Line of the Potters and skipped to the very last page of the tree, enthralled. He felt a holy reverence for the book. Around the end of the tree, there were only single sons: each Potter had a son who had another son and so on it continued, with very few daughters in between, for three centuries. The second-last daughter



born to the Potter family was Belvina Prince – about a hundred-and-twelve years before Rose. Her grand-nephew was Charlus Potter who'd married Dorea Black, who'd had a son, James Potter.

And that was the end of the line.

Harry was bewildered and confused. Where were he and Rose on the chart? And where was Mummy? He double-checked it, flipped a few pages aimlessly and considered it. He was still pondering over the matter when he heard a door crash open downstairs and a loud, familiar shout, "Come on, Harry, come on!"

Dropping the book promptly, without a second thought, heart pounding in excitement, he clambered out of the room and flew down the stairs. Uncle Padfoot swept him into a bear hug at the bottom of the stairs and laughed when he and Miss Bagshot began the round of questions.

"One-twenty-seven," he chuckled, nodding at Miss Bagshot. "A bouncing half-hour old now, and your Mummy's fine too – the baby came out fairly easy, much smoother than for either of those two hobgoblins – no, no I won't tell you if it's a boy or girl yet, best to keep up the suspense – hold my hand, we'll Apparate straight to the ward, all formalities cleared, don't pout you'll find out in thirty seconds, thank you Miss Bagshot very much, yes, yes, well – goodbye!"

And before he knew it, Harry was in the pristinely white little waiting room in front of his mother's private ward. The doors to her ward were half-ajar and he could just see Dad bending over Mummy's bed and stroking her forehead. She was fast asleep.

"The baby's been cleaned and fed a little," Uncle Padfoot explained, holding Harry back. "Sleeping, both of the dears. I just owled Rose. Shh, let them have their moment, Harry."

Harry danced on the spot impatiently. Dad and Mummy were hardly 'having a moment' as Uncle Padfoot said. Mummy was fast asleep. Then Dad turned around and Harry didn't wait to launch himself furiously at him, forgetting all his past grievances against his father in the face of the occasion.

“Is it a he?” he whispered into Dad’s shoulder, while Dad held him tightly, smiling widely.

Dad didn’t say anything but detached Harry gently and led him to the tiny cot next to Mummy’s bed – a doll’s house cot really, festooned with pink ribbons and fresh flowers.

“You have a beautiful new little sister,” a Healer said brightly, entering the room with a tray of food. “That’s for your Mum – though I guess you’d...”

“Three trays please, we’re starving,” Uncle Padfoot said cheerfully. “You haven’t had breakfast have you, Prongs?”

“Neither has Lily,” Dad said absently, nodding towards Mummy. Uncle Padfoot crossed the room and with admirable – and for him unusual – gentleness began to prod her awake. “Look at her, Harry. You aren’t disappointed that she’s a girl, are you?”

“Oh... no,” Harry sighed, looking down at the tiny red-faced doll, buried in frilly pink blankets and with a sweet little cap covering half her skull. “She’s...pretty.”

“Don’t worry,” Dad said, reading his thoughts. “She won’t always be so red.” He beamed fondly at the tiny, sleeping bundle. “The Healers swear she’ll have red hair like her mummy – only the Healers say it’ll be coppery-red while your mother’s is auburn.”

“And amber eyes too,” Uncle Padfoot said, as Lily yawned awake, looking very rumpled and weary. She smiled warmly at Harry and he climbed into her arms, inhaling the soft mother scent she exuded. There was no one in the world like Mummy.

“Amber?” Harry demanded, snuggling into his mother as she began to eat.

“Tawny. Golden-hazel,” Dad said. “Hazel from me, a variation of green from your mother.”

“She’ll be a beauty,” Uncle Padfoot smiled as proudly as any father, “Guess what her name is, Harry.”

“Violet Dorea Potter,” Dad burst out without waiting for Harry to answer. “Do you like it?” he asked, eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Harry frowned slowly, rolling the name over in his mind. “Actually – she kind-of looks more like a Snidget to me than a Violet.”

“Snidget Potter,” Uncle Padfoot chuckled, peering into the bassinet. “So it is. Welcome to the world, Snidget.”

**000**

Rose received the letter on the 6th of June at breakfast and roared with laughter, almost crying with joy. She kissed Neville and Ron on the cheeks, squeezed Draco and Daphne, danced a jig with Tracey, tickled Millicent and smiled dreamily at all the professors – much to Snape’s bewilderment and McGonagall’s consternation. She even waved at Smith, feeling particularly benign. And of course she generously distributed the photographs she’d received of her beautiful little sister: Violet Dorea Potter of the tawny eyes and huge dimples and teeny-tiny fingers, nicknamed Snidget.

**A/N: Check out what a Snidget is on the HPL Bestiary. It describes Violet Dorea Potter and her life rather well.**

## ***The Pot and The Kettle***

*Go after a man's weakness, and never, ever, threaten unless you're going to follow through, because if you don't, the next time you won't be taken seriously.*

### **Gideon Prewett**

"I hear Lee Jordan's going to give up Quidditch next year – wants to take up commentary," Draco said conversationally, chewing thoughtfully on his bacon. It was the second-to-last match of the season, Slytherin versus Gryffindor again. Rose had gone through four matches through the year and now, she was finally able to wolf down a proper breakfast before a year. The butterflies in her stomach had stopped dancing the tango after the second match and today, they seemed to be content with performing a mild foxtrot.

"I bet that poser, Smith's going to try out. He wants to beat me at Seeking, he said once," Rose said, sipping her ice-cold pumpkin juice. She'd found that ice-cold pumpkin juice helped her relax.

*"I still don't like you," she told him. "You're a foul-mouthed, arrogant, nasty poser and the greatest jerk of all time."*

*He grinned. "Same here, I still think you're raving insane. And one day, I'll be Gryffindor Seeker and beat you in every single game, see if I don't."*

Neville laughed and clapped her on the back. "Fat chance – you're the crème de la crème at Seeking, Rose."

She laughed, "If I wasn't so outstandingly modest, I would have said that."

"I might try out as Chaser next year," Draco said. "I'm very good at Quidditch, you know."

"So we've heard, more times than we would wish to," Nott called disparagingly from next to Zabini who snorted into his omelet and shot Rose a smile and a thumbs-up.

“Jealousy,” Draco tsked, “Any more snaps of Snidget?”

Rose nodded as the family owl, Adeline, arrived with letters. She divided the pictures she’d received – Uncle Padfoot loved taking snapshots of Snidget and owling them to anyone and everyone – between Draco, Neville and Tracey (an ardent baby-worshipper who never failed to coo and squeal enthusiastically whenever Snidget was mentioned).

“Hey – we’ve finally got one with her eyes open,” Draco said suddenly and Tracey practically fell over him, gushing about how sweet and adooooooooooooooooorable she was. Rose laughed, waving at the plump-cheeked baby in the photo, in her father’s lap, blinking up at the camera through wide, long-lashes tawny eyes.

“She has gorgeous eyes,” Neville said seriously. “Very Snidgetty isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Tracey said. “Snidgets *are* known for their jewel-bright eyes – weren’t they nearly hunted to extinction because of them?”

“Don’t even try to insinuate that’s going to happen to *my* Snidget,” Rose laughed, shaking her fist threateningly at Tracey. “My sister doesn’t have beautiful eyes only – I know she’s going to be gorgeous when she’s big enough to be.”

“Like any of us would ever have the guts to imply anything else,” Draco snorted. “Hurry up, Rose – you still haven’t finished your homework for Monday.”

“I can do it after the match,” Rose pointed out, wanting to dawdle as long as she could over her breakfast. She hated homework.

Neville snorted, “The match starts after lunch and it’ll finish in the evening after which we’ll either have a glorious party to celebrate our victory or spend the rest of the day in mourning. In any case, you won’t feel like doing your homework. So come on.”

**000**

Rose hadn't felt up to a big lunch, so she'd rushed through it and arrived twenty minutes before she needed to in the Changing Rooms. Now she scrutinized herself in her Quidditch robes in the mirror of her private cubicle – she was the only girl on the team and Snape had arranged a personal stall for her. The green-and-silver outfit had been made in early October and had fitted her to a tee then. But over the months, from October to June, it seemed to have shrunk. The pants had fitted quite neatly at the ankle, the sleeves had fallen just beneath her wrists and the hemline of the shirt had been upper-thigh limit.

Now, the legs seemed to have climbed up a few inches up her calf, the hemline brushed the end of her stomach and the sleeves were similarly higher up her arms. Rose loved the feeling that she'd grown several inches – all the pains and aches in her legs throughout the last year (Mum had called them 'growing pains') which had sometimes been so severe that she could barely fall asleep *were* worth this feeling of having grown, even a little. She'd been just over five feet at the beginning of the summer, and she hadn't measured herself since September.

And her hair too... she inspected herself more closely and patted her messy black hair approvingly. It had been above her ears in August. Now, in June, it just about brushed her shoulders – *just* above – framing her thin, pale face nicely and making her seem quite passably average, instead of sheer ugly or grotesquely weird. Of course she'd never be as beautiful as Ginny or Mum – *I wish I had red hair, redheaded women are so beautiful* – but she could settle happily for how she looked like now.

She smiled and trailed out of her changing room, latching onto Flint. She asked him to adjust her robes for her – he grunted and performed a few clumsy but adequate charms and warned her that they wouldn't last for long, telling her to go to Madam Hooch later – and then begged him to take her height. When he looked astounded and glanced at his watch, she fell on her knees as dramatically as Uncle Padfoot, and enjoyed the result immensely. Bending on your knees to people and then asking them to do something was a brilliant way to get something done. It was a pity that so many people

considered it beneath them or too flamboyant. Rose loved flamboyance.

“Five-two, point nine,” Flint grunted after she’d positioned herself against a wall and he’d conjured a measuring tape and had it take her height. “Eleven right? I was five-five when I was eleven, but that might be because I’m half-troll.” He smiled kindly down at her from his staggering height of six-seven. “You still have plenty of time to grow.”

“My mum’s only five-four and my daddy is five-nine,” Rose pouted. *And of course Uncle Padfoot towers over them at six-three.* “Mum keeps telling me that I shouldn’t expect to grow very tall – that this is just a false growth spurt and it’ll slacken off soon.” She wished her chest growth-spurt would hurry up and start soon – like Ginny’s had – because now, she was as flat-chested as any of the boys.

“And you’re a Seeker – you’re meant to be small,” Flint said and then said consolingly, after her face dropped. “Don’t worry about it – I’m sure you’ll be very pretty even if you are short when you grow up.”

“Thanks,” Rose said gratefully. “I’d love to be pretty.”

“It isn’t all that’s cracked up to be,” Warrington chuckled, emerging from the changing rooms.

“Much as if *you* know,” Montague scoffed. “You, pretty?”

Warrington proceeded to clobber his fellow team-member until Flint broke up their fight through sheer superior muscle power. Rose hovered on the edge of the fight, cheering them on loudly until Flint scathingly told her that if she enjoyed it so much, she was quite welcome to participate.

**000**

Rose floated over the stadium, watching the green-and-silver clad portion of the crowd whoop as the Slytherins scored their first goal. The rest of the arena, even the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, booed viciously, shaking their fists resentfully. No one wanted Slytherin to win this year, to gain its eighth straight victory which would set a Hogwarts record. She smiled brightly to herself – the Slytherin

Chasers might not be up to mark and the Keeper might depend more on bulk than brain to defend his hoops (quite deplorable indeed) but it's Beaters and it's Seeker were the very best.

She circled the pitch; gracefully ducking the Bludgers hit her way. Well, it wasn't actually graceful, she'd never managed to refine her aesthetic technique to Daddy's level – but it was efficient and after all, the ends always justified the means. She kept one eye on Jordan who was weaving elegantly but uselessly through the players, lower down, while her other eye swept the pitch constantly, barely blinking.

Really, Jordan was stupid. He was a beautiful flyer and very fanciable while on a broom, but he was thoroughly unsuited for professional Quidditch. Seeking wasn't about darting through the pitch prettily – as very few people knew – and entertaining the crowd with tracing Figure-Eights in the air (no matter how much applause that garnered).

You had to keep your wits about you while Seeking – one eye on the pitch, one eye on the other Seeker as she'd learnt from years of practice with her father. You had to leave your nerves on the ground and pick them up when you were done. You had to be ready to perform limb-crushing (though that only came at the worst and in professional games) stunts automatically, forget that you even had a very delicate human body which the slightest extra jerk might shatter into infinitesimal fragments (that was why Neville was bad at Quidditch – he was always worrying about the injuries he'd receive). You had to act on instinct, forget that it was a game if you wanted to win. The ends always justified the means in Quidditch – glory beyond measure if you won even if that glory was gained at the cost of broken appendages.

Seeking required a sharp instinct, constant vigilance and an absolute lack of nerves. Rose had all three.

Higher and higher up she drifted, till the players below were fist-sized specks of green-and-silver or red-and-gold and the yells of the crowd had blended seamlessly into one distant roar. She loved the heady feeling of being so far removed from reality, where only she existed, far, far away – she and the game. She gave herself up entirely to the game, she was not herself now, Rose Potter with all her little worries



and rages and pains glided away, and there was only *her*, without the feeling of any earthly burdens attached. The sense of absolute and utter peace, right in the midst of a tumultuous match – it was shiver-inducing glory.

Her eye was still on the pitch and Jordan, as she heard a particularly loud roar. She knew what that meant in a second even though she couldn't hear the commentator – Gryffindor had scored its seventh goal. Slytherin was sixty points. Now was the time to attack and test something she'd been working on all winter.

Smirking to herself and clutching the handle tightly, she dived straight down – two hundred and seventy feet. She heard the air whistle past her as the crowd screamed in surprise and perhaps horror, but she wasn't paying attention to that. All her concentration, *everything* was focused on the dive. If she didn't perform it to absolute hundred-percent perfection, if it wasn't exactly perfectly properly timed and just at *that* degree, she'd crack her head open on the pitch and her brains would spill out, she knew perfectly well. Few people would have been willing to take the risk – no wonder everyone admired the Wronski Feint but very rarely performed it – but Rose thrived on risks.

Thirty feet from the ground, she slowed down sharply and swooped out of the dive three feet from the ground, soaring upwards. The bottom of her stomach churned and settled into place and she let out the knife-edged gasp she'd suppressed, wiping the spittle that flecked her mouth and swallowing down the saliva that had been on the verge of falling out of her mouth. Her head was pounding as all the blood slowly settled back into place, and her ears screamed in pain but it was all worth it, *more* than worth it to hear the screams of the Gryffindors and the sickening crunch of broken bones as Jordan, who didn't have her skill and practice, crashed into the ground at ninety miles per hour.

The game had stopped mid-play as the players and the crowd had been watching the eleven-year-old Slytherin Seeker dive down at two hundred miles per hour and the thirteen-year-old Gryffindor Seeker, hot on her heels, at ninety miles. While the girl had pulled out *just* in time, the boy hadn't been so lucky. Thankfully, he hadn't been flying as fast as her, so his brains had not spilled out all over the ground as

Rose had been fearing hers would if she wasn't lucky. Still, he was quite a sight to see and Rose, after an initial glance, looked away, slightly sick. All the same, he was badly hurt enough for Madam Hooch, McGonagall, Snape and the rest of the Gryffindors to dive down to him, screaming murder.

The game stopped for a break and before she could dismount, Rose was engulfed into a bone-crunching hug by Flint. He babbled praise and surprise and joy all at once, and was soon joined by the rest of the Slytherin Team. Rose laughed in exhilaration, forgetting her guilt, as she ducked underneath their arms and sat down cross-legged on the pitch, waiting for the game to start again. It was worth it. It was more than worth it.

After that, the game was a cinch. Jordan rejoined after half-an-hour, but he was too dizzy to do much and Rose had the Snitch within a few minutes. At the end, Rose wondered whether Flint would propose to her first or if Wood would impale her before he got the chance. Their faces expressed their feelings towards her quite well – Flint blind adoration and Wood unadulterated hatred.

She was practically bowled over by her Slytherin worshippers and was only finally rescued by Ron, who managed to drag her through the crowd and towards the Broom Shed, unseen.

"That was brilliant," he said, holding her broom for her. "A Wronski Feint... I mean, you said that you'd do it someday, but today? None of us could have expected that."

"And I did it well?" Rose smiled sweetly, angling for compliments.

"If the Appleby Arrows don't take you when you're old enough, then they're all blind, bigoted idiots," Ron said flatly. "You were..." He smiled warmly at her, "I can't tell you – you wouldn't believe me. But, the attention of the whole pitch was on you – you were going so fast, I... well, I thought you were going to die, I really did and then you... were you even listening to them?"

"No," Rose confessed, "Were they screaming? I thought they were."

“More like a huge gasp of bewildered amazement,” Ron said as they approached the Broom Shed. “You’ll be famous one day, Rose. I’m sure of it.” He looked very serious and Rose was so happy, so full of golden joy and warmth that she couldn’t hold it all that she roared with laughter and threw her arms around him, kissing his cheeks twice. He was very red when she pulled back and she wondered whether steam would emerge from his particularly brilliant ears.

“You should get used to girls kissing you,” she said seriously. “I’m sure Padma...”

“I like Hermione better,” Ron said, looking a little desperate. “Padma Patil means nothing to me, absolutely...”

“Denial isn’t just the name of a river in Egypt,” Rose hummed cheerfully, putting her broom in its proper place and patting it approvingly. “You can’t like Hermione better than Padma, Ron. It’s just...” She stopped mid-sentence, and drew him back into the Broom Shed, crouching in the shadows by the door, listening intently. Her senses were still up to fever pitch, they always remained particularly sharp just after a Quidditch Match, because that was when they were at their strongest – particularly her sense of sight.

Sure enough, she saw two dark cloaks whipping soundlessly on the ferny floor, blending in with the approaching darkness, heading towards the Forbidden Forest.

“C’mon,” she whispered to Ron, swinging onto her broom. He climbed up behind her, arms wrapped around her waist, and they glided over the Forest, hunching in the shadows cast by the large trees, both listening hard. The Forest was quiet, very quiet, and even though the swishing cloaks made little noise, she could just about make out where the wearers were headed to. The noise finally stopped and Rose and Ron slid onto a patch of grass, both half-hanging onto the broomstick. They peeked out of the massive-tree trunks and saw Snape and Quirrell facing each other in a shadowy clearing, wands out – the first grim and resolute, the other white-faced and quivering.

“...d-don’t know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus...”

“Oh I thought we’d keep this private,” Snape said, his voice icy. “Students aren’t supposed to know about the Philosopher’s Stone.” Ron stifled a sharp gasp and Rose suddenly remembered that though he might have read about Philosophers’ Stones in theory – highly likely, considering his Ravenclawishness – he didn’t know that there was one lurking in the bowels of the castle. Quirrell was mumbling something that neither of them could catch, but Snape interrupted with a curt, “Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid’s, yet?”

*So Fluffy belongs to Hagrid! No wonder, he looks disreputable enough to own a giant three-headed dog.*

“B-b-but Severus, I –”

“You don’t want me as your enemy, Quirrell,” Snape said, taking a step forwards.

“I-I don-t know what you –”

“You know perfectly well what I mean. Your tricks won’t work on me, Quirrell, I can see right through them, I’ve had my eye on you for a long time. What about Halloween? Your little bit of hocus-pocus. I’m waiting.”

“B-but I d-d-don’t –”

“Very well,” Snape cut in. “We’ll have another little chat soon, when you’ve had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie.” He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Rose could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

Her mind was working at a furious rate, fueled wholly on the same uncanny, sharply-honed instinct that had protected her when she’d attempted the Wronski Feint earlier that evening, more powerful than logic, simpler than any reason in the universe, something she’d always have to fall upon when there was nothing left to her. The pieces of the jigsaw that had become her first year slowly began to fit together, not perfectly, because intuition could never give more than

an outline, but clearly enough for her brain to kick in where her gut feeling left off. Neville. The Philosopher's Stone. Quirrell.

Finally Ron tapped her tentatively on the shoulder and she nodded. Silently, they climbed onto the Nimbus 2000 and flew back to the Broom Shed. Only when they'd both dismounted did Ron finally ask, curiosity plain in every lineament, "What do you think that was about?"

Rose looked at him intently, one half of her mind still on fleshing out her theory. She wondered whether it would be safe to tell Ron and instantly felt ashamed of herself. How could she even *doubt* that her secret would be in safe hands, after she'd known him for nearly six years? It was an insult to their friendship. "It's a long story," she said quietly, one hand on his arm, looking steadily into his bright blue eyes. "But I think I understand it – we have time now, don't we?"

Ron took a good, hard look at her pale face and trembling shoulders and finally said, "No. We don't. Listen, this is going to look really suspicious – so, you go back to the Changing Rooms now and act like nothing's happened. You can always tell me later." He took a deep breath as if it hurt him to say that – he was unmistakably dying to know what she did.

Rose was shocked. "But this is important!" she hissed, gesticulating wildly. "You don't under-"

"Is it a life-or-death situation?" Ron demanded. When she shook her head, he said, "Good – it's not. That means it can *wait*."

"Don't you want to hear what I-" she began to wail.

"I do," he said, looking like his self-restraint would crack at any moment. "Very much – I'm simply *aching* to learn how much you've kept hidden from me this past year."

Now Rose felt guilty. "I'm sorry," she cried, meaning it very much, "I didn't mean to, I don't know how or why, it's just that..." *Just what? What happened to us all? Neville keeping secrets from me, Draco and me keeping secrets from him, me keeping secrets from you, I never meant this to happen, I don't know how it happened.*

“This is not the time or place,” Ron cut through her thoughts firmly, gripping her shoulder hard, blue eyes grave. “And I don’t blame you, not one bit, Rose – Lord knows I’ve kept enough from you too...”

This was unexpected and Rose acted accordingly. “What?” she screamed, more outraged and insulted that someone had managed to keep a secret from her poking, prying nose than surprised and interested in the aforementioned secret. She barely restrained herself from indignantly demanding how he had the *nerve* to keep a secret from her, only just remembering in time that she’d done the same thing. The pot and the kettle.

Ron smirked and clapped her on the back, transforming in the blink of an eyelid from a mature adult who took decisions in an adult-ly way to a normal, teasing boy. “Tomorrow,” he said, “At lunch. I know we have History before that, but I don’t want to draw suspicion – Neville’ll know something’s up. Try not to explode in curiosity.” He strode away, his hair burning fire in the last rays of the dying sun. Rose realized with a sharp shock that she hadn’t been the only one to grow taller over the year.

**000**

Rose threw her things pell-mell into her bag after their last lesson before lunch – History of Magic – was over, swung it rakishly over her shoulder and then launched herself on Ron who was calmly and methodically piling up his quills and parchment. She scooped up his things into his bag for him, threw his bag over her other shoulder, and then dragged him from the classroom.

He was laughing hopelessly at her urgency, his gangly body shaking with deep-seated laughter, barely managing to answer Padma and Neville’s startled questions, assuring them that no, Rose Potter had not finally lost control of her sanity, that she had no psychopathic intention whatsoever of cutting him up into tiny, tiny pieces and feeding them to the Giant Squid. This answer appeared to unsettle Padma more than ever – though Neville took it in good stead by making a face and telling Ron to be careful – and she trailed after them, as Rose took the stairs three at a time, Ron in tow.

"Oh, bugger off!" Rose finally snapped fiercely when Padma was still behind them when they'd reached the Great Hall, surprising herself by her vehemence. "You might be his girlfriend, but that doesn't give you the right to hang off his arm all the time!"

Padma scowled at her darkly, hands on her hips, while Ron slipped into the Great Hall for lunch to carry with him and Rose to the Lake. "I am not his girlfriend! *You* shouldn't treat him like he's your property!" Padma said in righteous indignation, "Rose Potter you're..."

"And you shouldn't lead him on the way you do, unless you've the right intentions towards him!" Rose cried. "Personally, I think..."

"You *think*!" Padma shrieked incredulously. "Since when have *Slytherins* ever bothered to think when they could use brute force instead?"

"I'm tempted to use *brute force* on you!" Rose snarled, looking down two inches at Padma. She knew she'd be able to beat the shorter girl in a fight with no effort whatsoever. Rose might be scrawny, but she was tough enough to tackle Ron, Neville and Draco in a physical fight.

"I'd love to see that," Ron said, obnoxiously cheerful, bearing a few rolls. "But unfortunately, we have to go right about now – I'll explain it later, Padma. Bye." He tossed Rose three rolls and then dragged her towards the Lake, munching gleefully on a roll himself.

"I love catfights," he said brightly, sprawling under the shade of a large beech tree near the sparkling Lake. "They're so..."

"Catty?" Rose suggested, chewing a roll viciously. "That woman is completely off her rocker."

"People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," Ron said virtuously. "Or rolls either," he added, casting a wary glance at the roll held like in a missile in his friend's hand. "So – do you want to go on first? Or should I?"

"Let me," Rose began. "Well, um, it's very long, like I said so..." She took a deep breath and launched into the tale, sparing no details, covering everything that they'd learned about Philosopher's Stone

and Fluffy and even adding her observations on Neville's behavior throughout the year. She left out nothing – except her experience with the Mirror of Erised (she'd already decided it was too humiliating to disclose to any other human being until she reached the age of ninety) and the theory she'd developed the day before.

She finished ten minutes later and leaned back against Ron's shoulder, throat parched. Absently, he stroked her messy black hair like he'd used to when they were younger and had just finished a particularly rowdy game. Rose closed her eyes, feeling warm and comfortable with the sun on her face, a half-finished roll in her hand and her head against Ron's shoulder.

"It figures," Ron said slowly, still stroking her hair. "I've been thinking the same about Neville."

Rose peeked open an eye and yawned, "So I'm not a hypochondriac. I wrote to Mum and she told me to give him his space, that he was growing up and some rubbish about how weird pre-pubescent boys are."

"Not as weird as pre-pubescent girls," Ron muttered and Rose playfully swatted at his face. "But, I should start telling you." He glanced at his watch and began.

"You know I started exploring the castle around the beginning of the year. It was fun and I discovered loads of things. Maybe I'll tell you about them someday, I just don't think I could ever share those memories with someone who hasn't seen them, hasn't found out them by herself. You understand don't you?" He looked worried that she wouldn't.

"A bit," Rose confessed, "Not much – but I think I get the gist. Never mind, go on."

"Then, around October, I found the Mirror of Erised. You know about it – we got into a quarrel over it, didn't we? – and what I saw in it too. I became mad about it – yes, that's right, mad. I was always thinking about it, couldn't keep my mind off it. I'd visit it everyday, but I couldn't sleep at night, I needed it more and well, I started getting out of bed and roaming the castle, searching for it, at night. I'd sit by it for



hours and think, and it was...it was..." he shuddered, and his fingers knotted painfully in her hair. She looked up into his eyes and shivered. His eyes – there was both heaven and hell in them, and she was frightened.

Then his eyes cleared and he resumed his tale, voice very old now, "I wanted to die and be with them, then but more than that, I just wanted to stay there forever, right in front of it and think about the past. I don't want to think about what I'd have done if it continued for much longer. Well, it was Zacharias who saved me in the end." He half-smiled.

"Smith?" Rose asked, startled. "Didn't know you two were on first-name terms..."

Ron shrugged. "He roams the castle too at night – mostly the kitchens. Well, one night he saw me going to Ravenclaw Tower and he was well... curious about why a prim Ravenclaw like me would ever venture out of bed. I think he saw me many times – going to the same place, but he never found out where precisely that place was – kept a watch on me, no doubt. Well, he wanted to know what was happening and we started arguing about it..."

*"...Then I'll tell..."*

*"...But you have no evidence, what are you going to say?"*

*"...I'll tell your friends, Longbottom and Potter..."*

*"...And what about you? What were you doing?"*

*"You're not in a place to be throwing accusations..."*

*"I wasn't accusing, I just..."*

*"Some things, laddie-boy, must never be revealed..."*

*"Charming, aren't you?"*

*"I do try."*

*“...well, finally, I had to show him and he was satisfied. And the Fat Friar must have seen us that day – Dumbledore appointed him as sentry over the place...”*

*She paused in the hallway, uncertain of which path to take.*

*“Lost, miss?” a cheerful voice asked. She turned, startled, and found the Fat Friar behind her.*

*“Not really,” she muttered. “Just need a place to hide...”*

*The Fat Friar raised two delicately-sculpted, transparent brows. Up close, Rose saw that he was actually rather attractive. His plumpness suited him, as did his silvery-ness. She wondered if he was an ancestor of Cedric Diggory’s.*

*“I’m tailing two boys,” she explained, not quite knowing why she was telling him this. “They went there.” She pointed.*

*“And their names were...” the Friar prompted, smiling kindly down at her.*

*“Ron Weasley,” she said, wondering why the words came out, wondering why she was giving away her friend. “And a blonde bloke.”*

*The Friar nodded, still smiling. “And you would like to visit the room after they’ve left, hmm? Miss...”*

*“Rose Potter,” she supplied.*

*“Ah, yes,” the Friar said. “Well, I would recommend the room, next-door. It’s quite safe, just a disused classroom.”*

*Rose nodded and slipped inside. The Friar followed her in. She pressed her ears against the door, waiting for the click that would signal that the boys had left the room.*

*“Do you have any idea?” the Friar asked conversationally, floating a few feet from her. “Why those two young gentlemen would be tempted to visit that room?”*

*“Not really,” Rose shrugged, bumping her shoulder against the wood. “Ron likes exploring the castle. He always does it alone, though.”*

*“At night, perhaps?” the Friar asked gravely.*

*Rose shrugged, once again bumping her shoulder. “He doesn’t tell us much, really.”*

*She heard the door click open and waited for the boys to walk away. “Bye,” she told the Friar, who smiled and waved her off.*

“...And Dumbledore found out and one night, he was there when I went there.” Ron stopped abruptly, “He told me it shows us the deepest, darkest desires of our soul – nothing more, nothing less. These were his exact words, I still remember. Let me think, yes he said, ‘Men have wasted away before this Mirror, entranced by what they have seen or driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that.’ Then he told me never to seek it again, that it was going to be moved.” Ron pondered for a minute. “He was right. I’d probably have gone mad if I had to go through that ordeal much longer.”

“Ordeal?” Rose asked quietly. “You saw your parents and brothers. Why was it a...”

“It was wonderful,” Ron said equally quietly, “But it was horrible, at the same time. Just think, seeing the faces of the people you’d seen murdered when you were little, every single day, not being able to tear away from it, but not being able to do anything about it, it was...” He continued stroking her hair, silent. And Rose finally understood.

She pulled herself up from his shoulder and embraced him tightly, burying her face in the crook of his neck. “You poor thing,” she whispered, feeling pity without contempt for the first time in her life, empathy instead of only sympathy. She felt old, very old and yet so young, so very, very young in the face of time and eternity and the galaxies that had suddenly opened up to her with the brilliance of a sunburst.

Ron smiled into her neck. "I'm fine now," he muttered, "Good for the character, I bet. Adversity and all."

"Tripe," Rose said, disentangling herself, blinking away the tears that had sparkled to her eyes. "I want you to listen to me now, Ron, very carefully. It's about Quirrell and Neville and the Philosopher's Stone and how they all tie in together." She clasped his hands tightly, looked straight into his bright blue eyes and began.

**A/N: Please try the new poll I've posted – it's on my profile!**

**To the real SRFan!!:** I always love your reviews – they cheer me up a lot and remain a source of inspiration while I continue writing new chapters. As for being a nice person... haha, my little brother – Harry's modeled on him – is prepared to swear in blood that I am anything *but* that. First year probably won't end on much of a bang though.

**To the counterfeit SRFan!!:** Eh? Me equal to confused. You equal to weird.

**To qwerty:** Why, thank you! Draco is his own man for all time, and if he ever changes his opinions about muggleborns it'll be because he's convinced himself by *himself*. No one else will ever be able to influence him, even if it might seem like that. Well, that's what I think.

**To Kenzie:** Thanks!

## ***Endgame***

*The Moving finger writes; and, having writ,*

*Moves on: not all your Piety nor Wit*

*Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,*

*Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.*

## **Omar Khayyam**

Rose signed her name left-handedly – a year's worth of History classes training to write with her left hand had made her almost ambidextrous – with a flourish on her answer sheet and surveyed the result proudly. Defense against the Dark Arts was a cinch for her, she'd picked up plenty of pointers in defensive magic from Daddy and Uncle Padfoot growing up and she genuinely loved the subject. It was second-best to Quidditch.

She stretched out of her seat and deposited the answer sheet on Quirrell's desk, the first one to finish their DADA exam. Hermione threw her an annoyed look as she began on the thirteenth page of her assessment – she was offended that someone had managed to finish their exam before her. DADA was their very last exam and the one in which Rose was most confident. By all rights, she should have been deliriously happy as she quietly left the hall, whooping with glee as she danced down the stone corridors of the castle, secure in the knowledge that the results would arrive after a week and the intermittent week would be all fun and games.

But she wasn't. Her nerves were keyed up – not to fever pitch, just enough to send her stomach jolting with every step as she ghost-walked out of the castle into the sunshiny grounds. She slid down onto one of the Lake's grassy banks, opposite Hagrid's Hut, and absently began to chew on a bit of grass, ruminating.

*Your father and Uncle Padfoot send their love. They're nearly as busy – you'd probably doubt me if I said they're even busier – as you are. The Ten-Yearly International Council of Warlocks convenes at the Ministry of Magic – the first time in two hundred years it's ever sat at*

*London – the day your exams finish, so of course everyone at the MoM is very busy now, tidying things up, finishing all the paper-work etc.*

It began today and every self-respecting warlock worth his or her Order of Merlin would be crowding the MoM. She could just picture them all now in one of the cavernous underground chambers of the Ministry, all standing up to attention, reciting the oath that they swore to abide by the laws set down by their predecessors in 1707, be just and fair and do what was honorable and needed, chanting the words of power after the Minister of Magic, Bartemius Crouch. Daddy, topped to be the Head of the Auror Department when Rufus Scrimgeour became Minister of Magic (as everyone was sure he would be once Crouch retired) would be there and so would Uncle Padfoot, a Level 9 Unspeakable already at the tender age of thirty-two. And Dumbledore... he *must* be there, leaving his school and the Stone to the dubious protection of a couple of teachers who hadn't as much gumption as a pair of first-years.

Rose sneered to herself as she thought of their ineptitude. Well not Snape, really, but the others... couldn't they see what Quirrell was doing? Were they simply blind? Did they choose to see only what they wished to? Or was it that she was simply older than her eleven years, sharper, more observant? She ruminated, her eyes on the Lake glittering in the sunlight, nibbling alternately on a piece of grass and a strand of her hair.

"Hello," a voice said politely from above her, startling her from her thoughts. She easily remembered the voice, but the courteous tone... well, it sounded downright odd on *that* voice. She tilted her head upwards, shielding her eyes from the glare of the late-afternoon summer sun. "You?" she asked, a little wary.

"Me," he said calmly, plopping down next to her and sitting with his legs neatly crossed. "Any objection?"

Yes. "Um... not really," she said cautiously, "How was your er, test?"

"Better than Potions at least," he sighed, wrinkling his nose disdainfully at the thought of Potions. "Ron's starting on his six-hundred-and-fifty-seventh page and Malfoy can't remember the

definition of a Blasting Spell so he's peeking at Longbottom's copy. There's still fifteen minutes left – you finished fast."

Rose fluttered her fingers idly, "DADA comes easy to me."

"Bet it must – your dad's an Auror. Isn't he the Junior Head of the Department, now?"

"Yes," Rose smiled, her heart swelling with pride and immediately forgetting her wariness and worry. "He got promoted last week."

The golden-haired boy next to her whistled, impressed. "Very young isn't he?"

"Yeah," she conceded. "But it's not like Scrimgeour's going to give up his post anytime soon, is it? Least not till Crouch drops his. It'll be years and years before he becomes Head of the Department."

"Cool," he said. Silence stretched between them, as he absently began to tear clumps of grass and throw them into the lake. The tentacles of the Giant Squid bobbed up and down beneath the mirror-smooth surface, and Rose was reminded of her first night at Hogwarts, when she'd fallen into the stormy lake while on the boat and how the Squid had saved her. She owed her life to it.

"So..." she said, at a loss for words for once. She'd never had a real conversation with him – just traded insults, had a duel, enlisted his help in enticing a mutant hound and sneered at him behind his back (and sometimes in front of it too). "What are you doing here?"

"No one else has finished," he said matter-of-factly, "So I just thought I'd come down and keep you company."

Rose snorted. *My thoughts could keep me better company than you.* Nevertheless she was grateful for his presence. It was a tonic and kept her from fretting – she had her plan for the night laid out nicely and neatly with Ron. There was no point worrying. Smith would provide a refreshing distraction. "Don't you have any friends?" she teased.

She realized, a moment too late that that was the wrong thing to say when he quickly turned his head away from and instantly took on a defensive position, knees drawn up to his chest, arms positioned on top of them and chin propped on his arms. "Of course I do," he snapped, "I have the others, don't I?"

"The Gryffindor boys?" she asked and he nodded aggressively. Something close to pity whelmed in the pit of her stomach. Pity... one thing she'd never felt for him. Anger, yes, annoyance certainly and the urge to spank him thoroughly, but pity... never that. She wanted to say, *I'm sorry you have no friends – but really that's your own fault, you're such a prickly, inconsiderate brat.* A few months ago she might even have said that, with her usual thoughtlessness and lack of tact but now... understanding what Ron had gone through, what Neville was probably going through, reflecting about the First War, growth pangs, through all of it, she'd somehow matured. She wasn't a grown-up yet, but she wasn't a child anymore. Welcome adolescence.

Instead of drawing him even more tightly into his shell, she slowly, clumsily, awkwardly tried to draw him out of it. "There are friends, and there are acquaintances," she said dreamily. "Most popular people only have acquaintances, don't they? You know, people you say hey-hi-hello to in the hallway and help up when they trip over their shoelaces?"

"If they trip over their shoelaces, it's their fault," Smith said bluntly. "Why would I want to help them?"

*What planet are you from?* "I was being metaphorical," she explained feeling like the Goddess of Patience. "I mean that it's easy to have loads of acquaintances – like you have (*And I bet all your acquaintances want to chew your ears off*) – but that it's really, really hard to make true friends. It's not unusual, not having real friends that'd um, stick with you through thick and thin."

Smith pondered over this for a moment. "Ron and you are that close," he stated, looking slightly depressed.

"Ron-and-Neville-and-me," Rose corrected him. "We're *this* close." She grinned as she plastered three fingers together.



"You don't deserve Ron," Smith said frankly and Rose's jaw dropped in surprise. He smiled at her expression, "Personally, I don't think it's a real friendship – all you do is take and take from it, and yet, you never give back anything. Even Ron and Hermione are closer than you two – for all you've known each other for six years."

*Do you actually like being slapped by people? And where do you get your information from?* "How do you know all this?" she asked, trying not to throw him into the lake. She didn't believe him, of course. She gave nearly as much as Ron did to their friendship – at least she hoped so.

"Ron told me," he said, looking smug. "We formed what you call an acquaintanceship over the Mirror of Erised – I bet he told you about that too. He always tells you things you don't deserve to know."

"Why didn't you just form a Survivors of the Lestrage Attack Support Group and bond over Firewhiskey in a seedy pub?" she demanded, unable to resist the urge to be caustic to someone who so rightly deserved burning derision, glaring at the skull-shaped scar on his forehead. She was being very mild, actually. Somehow, she could sense that being brutal would do nothing good here – she needed to be gentler than she usually was. Something told her that he needed it.

"Now you sound more like you," he said cheerfully, "You started to sound like the other girls – well, all the girls except for Parkinson of course."

"She thinks you're an uncouth boor," Rose said with relish. *And so do I.*

"And I think she's a pug-faced, snot-nosed cow," he said calmly, waving an airy hand. "Respect where respect is due, of course. Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you... I think you rock at Quidditch."

Rose blushed crimson at this unexpected praise. Smith complimenting her was so... surreal. He never praised anyone as far as she could tell. "Thanks," she muttered and forced an awkward laugh, "I bet I look like Ron's hair, right now."

"You look fine – for once," he said. "You look too sallow usually."

“Blushing suits me,” Rose grinned. “Just like not trying to resemble Fluffy suits you. You look like you’re a bull and someone’s flaunting a scarlet flag in front of you, most of the time.”

“How gracious of you,” he half-smiled. “But I’d better retreat right now – I can see Malfoy and Longbottom heading towards us.” He wrinkled his nose scornfully as he stretched up, yawning, “Though I still don’t understand how you can stand Malfoy.”

*And I still don’t understand how you can stand yourself. If I were you, I’d throw myself off a cliff into a river thoroughly poisoned with arsenic and full of flesh-ripping piranhas.* “You can sit here if you want,” she invited him, feeling very magnanimous, and waving to Neville and Draco.

“*Please,*” he snorted contemptuously, “I sit with the spawn of Satan? What do you take me for?”

*The kind of person who uses baby Puffskeins as Bludgers in an impromptu Quidditch match – and knocks them out with bats meant for Bludgers.* Smith didn’t wait for an answer but strode off, golden hair glinting in the late-afternoon sunlight.

“What was *he* doing with *you*?” Neville demanded sounding like the old Neville, sprawling out at Rose’s feet, while Draco sat down decorously, cross-legged like a lady, next to her.

“Jealous?” Rose teased. She turned her face away from him towards the Lake. She knew it would betray the aching sorrow in her heart – she’d never been able to hide her feelings, her face had always betrayed her. “How was your exam?”

“He cheated from me,” Draco sniffed, looking disgruntled. “And of course Quirrell said nothing – teacher’s pet, aren’t you, Neville?”

He laughed, seemingly without a care in the world. To Rose’s trained ears, it sounded somehow... false, ringing harshly with counterfeit joy. Suddenly, she longed for Smith again – at least he took her mind off reality in a way that Neville could not do, now. With Smith she could be an eleven-year-old again – something she did not feel now – locked in a verbal sparring combat, careless of life and the world, free.

“Ron?” she asked, simply for form’s sake. She and he had concocted their plan very carefully and both had agreed that it might give away vital clues if they met before they needed to.

“He went off his gang – Padma, Michael, Granger,” Neville explained. “I wonder why Granger isn’t in Ravenclaw – she’s so smart.”

“She isn’t,” Rose corrected him, “She just swots day and night over her books and she has a photographic memory, too. That doesn’t count as smartness.”

“Well, for people without photographic memories, it *does*,” Neville yawned. “What would you define smartness as, Draco?”

“Saying the right thing at the right time, all the time,” Draco said, grinning.

Rose turned to him, startled. “That’s what my Uncle Padfoot says,” she whispered, “How did you...?”

“Aunt Bella told me,” he explained, shifting uncomfortably, “Well, they were cousins, weren’t they?” He looked very awkward and Neville, with his usual tact, changed the topic abruptly to Quidditch teams. Rose joined in the conversation with the boys, her heart only half in it. Bringing up the familial connections had... unsettled her. Perhaps it was because Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange were so similar. Perhaps because they were all so closely related – she by virtue of her grandmother’s Black blood, Uncle Padfoot by his own, Draco by his mother’s, Neville and Ron as well by their great-grandparents or something. Blood... everyone she knew said it didn’t matter but in Slytherin, she’d come to realize, it mattered very much.

Then everyone in the world must be similar. They all had common traits, dark and light mingled inseparably, seamlessly to create rare, unique, precious individuals – and so very many of them. Nobody was wholly good – maybe not even Mum and Daddy – and nobody could be wholly bad – though she wasn’t quite sure that would apply to people like You-Know-Who and the Lestrange woman. *Then what makes us all different?* she wondered, bewildered, confused, shivering as from a chill breeze. *Why do some people seem so good and some so bad? Or am I wrong? Is bad good and good bad? Is*

*there any right, any wrong, anywhere? How do you define it? Where are the limits? Are there any limits?*

“Rose?” Draco poked her impatiently, “You’ve been staring at the Lake with your mouth open for the last... five minutes. Are you worried?”

*Yes. But not about the exam.*

“Don’t worry,” Neville said consolingly, “You’re the best in DADA – cheer up.”

*And how precisely am I expected to cheer up when I’m contemplating the mysteries of the universe?* “Thanks for inflating my ego,” she said airily, plastering a smile and feeling very far from airy. “I appreciate all compliments.”

“What is wrong with you?” Draco demanded, sounded annoyed. “You sound like you’re on your way to the gallows.”

*So I’m not that good of an actress. There go my dreams of starring in Hollywood.* “And you sound like you’re stuck in the eighteenth century,” she retorted, “I’m *fine*. Aren’t I allowed to be gloomy when I want?”

“No,” Draco said frankly. “You’re all sunshine and laughter – you don’t have a gloomy side. Maybe it’s because you never think about serious things – baby.”

Rose’s temper rose immediately. Oh, she didn’t think about serious things, did she? What was she supposed to be – the comic relief on the side that provided amusement while the heroes of the play enacted the more serious roles? The jolly sidekick devoid of depth but always ready for a laugh, whom everyone teased and never gave a second thought to? So that was what they all thought of her, was it? Just because she loved life most of the time and wasn’t afraid to show it? Just because she underplayed everything she did with light banter? The Midnight Duel, enticing Fluffy, the Wronski Feint... they’d have been stupendous, fated acts of courage if someone like *Neville* had performed them, but with her? It was just another quite acceptable, nothing unusual part of what she did everyday.

Tears of rage and pain sprang to her eyes as she leaped to her feet, forgetting her earlier plan of being calm and collected and giving Neville no cause for suspicion. Damn the plan! Neville could rot in Hell for all she cared!

For the very first time in her life, she flung the word Smith treated so casually and used on a daily basis. *Never use that word unless under extreme provocation, Rosalie*, Daddy had told her seriously when she'd innocently asked him what it meant (mispronouncing) when she was six and she'd heard Uncle Padfoot's latest girlfriend throw it at him after he'd broken up with her.

"Fuck you," she hissed, causing both Neville and Draco to gasp in horror. "You...you..." *There, Rose, you've used up your quota of swear-words for the day. Shut up.* "...Ingrates!" she finished, restraining herself from pouring a stream of filthy invectives on them. Neville hadn't said anything, only Draco had. And he wasn't worth her precious vocabulary of brothel-speak as Uncle Padfoot termed it. She hurried away from them and stormed inside the castle, batting away the tears that streamed to her eyes.

She was running so fast that she didn't see the people in her path. One person was too late to move out of her view and with, a startled "Oh!" Hermione Granger crashed into her. They both went sprawling sideways on the stone floor. Rose groaned, already anticipating bruises. "Sorry," she muttered, gingerly rising to her feet. Wincing, she helped Granger up.

"Me too," Granger nodded profusely. "I wasn't looking either... oh, are you crying?"

"No," Rose lied determinedly, furious at herself. Why was she crying like a baby now? She hated the fact that she could still cry – big girls of eleven-almost-twelve did not cry, as far as she knew.

"You are!" Granger said, looking concerned. "Does it hurt? Come on, I'll take you to Madam Pomfrey, she'll apply some Bruise Balm..."

"S'okay," Rose muttered, "I won't need it. Daddy told me not to apply Bruise Balm for minor bruises – if you use it too often, your body

develops an immunity against it. Same thing with Pepper-up Potion and common remedies.”

Granger nodded, looking fascinated at this news. “So you just let a common disease – like a cold – take its normal course?” She sounded like she was taking notes in class. All she needed was a quill and parchment to complete the look of a student in class.

“Yeah, most of the time,” Rose said distractedly, neatly side-stepping Granger, “Where’s Ron?”

“One of the tertiary steeples,” Granger said, “He says the view from there is fascinating at sunset – we’re all going to watch it together. I just went up to Gryffindor Tower keep my bag and things. Want to come?”

Yes, *please*. “No, thank you,” Rose said, for the sake of the plan and because she didn’t want to intrude. “Have fun.”

Granger smiled and hurried off and Rose was just heading towards the direction of the dungeons when a voice yelled behind her, “Wait up!”

She continued briskly forwards, not even looking back. Neville, panting, and Draco, wheezing, finally caught up with her and flanked her on both sides. She steadfastly ignored them both, her eyes straight ahead.

“I’m sorry,” Draco said, sounding like it cost him a lot to say those two words. Even while apologizing, he sounded condescending.

Neville shoved Draco. “Really,” Draco said, sounding a fraction more sincere – but only a fraction.

“We’re *both* sorry for offending you,” Neville said seriously, after kicking Draco. “Really and truly.”

Rose began climbing down the stairs, busy ignoring them both.

“You can hit us if you like,” Draco suggested. He was more practical than Neville. “If it, um, you know, relieves your feelings.”

Neville nodded vigorously but Rose ignored them both. "*Cyanide*," she said coldly to a flat stretch of stone. It heaved open and she swept into the Slytherin Common Room and towards the stairs to the girls' dormitories. She was just about to climb up the steps when Draco suddenly caught her wrist and wrenched it around so that she was forced to look at him. If the room had been empty, Rose would have killed him. Instead, viciously, she lashed out at him, so that he dropped her arm with a yelp of pain. She climbed up the stairs swiftly, not even trying around.

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"They really are sorry," Tracey said softly. "Don't you think you ought to forgive them?"

"No," Rose said coldly. "I am not called upon to be Jesus Christ, at this point in time."

"Glad to see rage hasn't shortened your tongue," Pansy said idly, flicking the leaves of Witch Weekly. "Give up on her, Trace – Draco deserves to have the law laid down to him once in a while." She smiled unpleasantly, "Let him learn that women aren't the weak chattels he assumes."

"I don't think he assumes anything at all about women," Millicent said, absently, biting into an éclair she'd sneaked from the kitchen. "His mother's simply a dragoness; for all that she minces her words so prettily. But, still, Rose – aren't you hungry?"

"What time is it?" Rose asked.

"Seven-thirty, only," Tracey said, stroking Rose's hair, "But still, you haven't had anything since lunch at noon and..."

"Is Neville still downstairs?" she asked again.

"Yes, and so is..."

But Rose ignored the rest of the sentence. She tumbled out of bed and knelt down next to the trunk positioned at the end of her bed, fumbling with the lock. She rummaged through the contents until she

found what she needed – the music box, the two-way mirror and the Marauder's Map. She pocketed the latter two and clutching the music box, made her way out of the dormitory, ignoring the other girls. She sauntered down the stairs and peeked into the Common Room. Sure enough, Neville and Draco were ensconced in two armchairs positioned near the fire, their heads bent together in close conversation.

She glided over to them and stood behind Neville's chair, waiting for someone to take notice of her. Sure enough, Draco did and he yelped in surprise. Neville turned around and was just about to beg for forgiveness before she put a light hand on his shoulder.

"I forgive you two for being utter prats," she said. *No, I most certainly do not. Who says only Harry James Potter can hold grudges?* "And I'm sorry too... for well, not forgiving you earlier. I guess you two didn't understand why I blew up at you."

"No," Draco said frankly, "Will you tell us now?"

Rose snorted at him. "If you don't know now, I won't tell you," she said coldly. Then she turned to Neville again, who was craning up his neck to look at her. "Here," she said, unsure of how to do what she wanted to subtly. "Take this, as an... um, reminder of our friendship." She pushed the music-box into his hand. The old Neville would have thrown a volley of bewildered questions at her, but this new Neville only nodded, smiled and squeezed her hand warmly. It hurt to know that everything was clicking so neatly into places, that there were no cracks left where she could marshal comfortable doubt in. She didn't want to believe that her Neville had changed – no, that he was being *manipulated*, he hadn't changed of his own free will she was sure – but she was forced to.

"Have you had dinner yet?" she asked. They both nodded, looking a little ashamed. "Oh," she yawned idly, "I'll just go have some myself – there's no need to follow me." Draco still looked like he was going to get up but she glared dangerously at him and he fell back into his seat, looking a little uncertain.



She swept out of the Common Room, into the dungeons illuminated only with flickering torches. She crouched into a shadowed niche and plucked out her two-way mirror, knotting her body into a small ball.

The two-way mirror was a present she'd received from Uncle Padfoot on her fifth birthday – he'd made it himself and was fittingly, very smug that day. It had worked very well then, but over the years it had lost most of its magic. It tended to work in fits and starts now – the reason she hadn't left the other mirror at Godric's Hollow with her parents. It simply wouldn't work over that great distance. But, now she was going to communicate with Ron – she'd given him the other part of the mirror soon after they'd finished making their plan – who was only at the other end of the castle. It would work fairly well – they'd experimented with it many times before adding it as an essential to their plan.

"Ronald Weasley," she whispered to the dark surface of the small, oval mirror – cracked and chipped at places.

In the darkness, she caught a faint glint of his bright blue eyes but nothing else. His voice whispered back to her, "Rose?"

"Yeah," she muttered, "He took the music box. I wasn't very subtle about giving it away – but he still took it without asking me anything."

Ron whistled softly. "Where are you know? I'm in the Ravenclaw Common Room."

"Hiding in the dungeons," she explained to him, "I'm going down for dinner now. I don't think they'll start anything until everyone else is in bed – nothing before midnight. Don't fall asleep."

"I'll be in the Common Room," he assured her. "As soon as you give me the signal, I'll go down to the third floor and hide behind that statue of Helen of Troy?"

"And do nothing," Rose said. "I'll be on their tail. If they enter the corridor... we go to Snape."

"I still prefer Flitwick," Ron grumbled. "He's older."

“Age does not guarantee experience, Ronald Bilius,” she said gravely, “If it did, everyone in the castle would know what Neville was up to. I mean, what Neville is up to because of Quirrell – it’s not his fault.” She said the last part vehemently.

“Sure,” Ron yawned. “Go have dinner. Good luck.”

“You too,” she said, pocketing the mirror and hurrying off towards the Great Hall.

**000**

Rose waited until the clock in the girls’ dormitory ticked eleven-thirty before tiptoeing noiselessly away. The Common Room was almost empty. She sprawled out behind an enormous armchair in one of the darkest corners of the room. She was lying on the cool stone floor, peeping out from underneath the legs of the chair. The minutes ticked away on her wrist-watch as she waited patiently, ignoring the cold and the discomfort. This was for Neville.

An hour passed and soon, the Common Room was empty. Rose was utterly exhausted, but she couldn’t fall asleep – she was too excited and her stomach was squirming terribly. It was a quarter past one when she heard soft footsteps – echoing in the silence, for even the flames in the hearth had gone out. She squirmed out of her place and there was Neville, walking across the room, cloak flapping past him. In that moment, looking at him, she suddenly forgot her plan to stay hidden and tail him. He was *her* Neville, he couldn’t be what she thought him to be, if only she convinced him now, they could all forget it had ever happened, without involving anyone else in the matter.

That was why she’d yelled down all Ron’s suggestions to consult a teacher about the matter – not because she thoroughly doubted their incompetence (she did – but not much) but because she didn’t want anyone else to be involved. She didn’t want him to be guilty, for him to have to face the consequences. It wasn’t his fault, why should he suffer?

“Neville!” she yelled. Startled, he turned to her and she hurried towards him, blocking the path to the exit. She clung to the front of his

robes and looked down into his eyes – he was about an inch shorter than her.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, “Why are you doing this?”

He looked up at her blankly. He tried to shake her off but she clung on tightly, whimpering, begging, pleading. She didn’t see his hand slip into his pocket, take out his wand and bring it up – until it was at her throat.

“*Stupefy!*” he said clearly, coldly, his voice high-pitched. There was a blinding flash of red light, a split-second of understanding, before she toppled like a log onto the stone flagstones, unconscious. The mirror slipped out of her pocket as she fell, to rest by her elbow. He didn’t notice, as he hurried on, out of the Common Room.

**000**

Ron didn’t know what to do. For him this was highly unusual. He’d never really been in such a position – he’d always had something to *do*, or failing that, known what he wanted to do. There’d always been a concrete direction, a single, unified goal in which to direct his thoughts and marshal his actions.

Growing up with the explosive recipe that was Rose Potter and Neville Longbottom – with generous help from Ginevra Weasley – together had probably done that. He’d spent most of his childhood keeping Rose, Neville and Ginny – who was quite a force to be reckoned with in her own right – in one piece, free from mortal peril. The other part of his childhood had just been spent in reading. *When in doubt, always read – that’s what you do*, as Ginny had often told him, a disgusted sneer playing on her expressive small face. His retort, *I like reading*, had always fallen flat with his bemused sister.

But now, he’d spent the last... three hours reading alone in the Ravenclaw Common Room. Not that he minded of course, he’d have continued on blissfully unaware of time hadn’t the arrival of house-elves – who all sent him reproving looks for keeping such a late hour – startled him out the mesmerizing depths of *War and Peace* (a book he could barely understand but still liked to read). He couldn’t go back to reading his book in peace as the house-elves began scuttling

around the Common Room, tidying it up for a new day – their presence had always unsettled him a little, he didn't know why.

And he most certainly couldn't go to bed, not tonight. Ah well, he'd catch up on lost sleep through their holiday week. He stared absently at the merrily-crackling flames in the bronze-hued marble fireplace, letting his thoughts wander. Rose was supposed to have contacted him, by now. They'd been sure something would happen at the stroke of midnight – so dramatic – but the hour had passed and Ron, after a flash of preliminary apprehension, had returned to *War and Peace*, feeling very mature that he was reading such a great book (never mind that he couldn't understand it). Another hour had ticked by without him noticing, until the house-elves arrived at one-ten.

Now, he was a bit more anxious. Rose had been scheduled to contact him by the mirror every two hours – the last time he'd exchanged a quick word with her had been before midnight when she'd just left her dormitory. They'd planned to give up their vigil at six in the morning – if Neville didn't arrive by then, all well and good, and they would pretend the matter never happened. But it was one-thirty – she ought to have called him ten minutes ago, if only to assure him that she was fine.

*She might have forgotten*, he hoped, *I'm confusing her memory with Hermione's*. He chuckled wryly at the thought – Hermione had a dazzling memory that he envied at times, while Rose's memory was anything but dazzling (particularly when it concerned theories in Transfiguration). *She wouldn't forget something so important*, a cool voice in the back of his head reminded him, *she's not stupid*. No, Rose Potter, was definitely not stupid – no matter how hard she worked to persuade everyone otherwise by her antics. He'd known her long enough to form a definite, unshakeable opinion of her.

But of course he'd known Neville for the same length of time, and look where that had led him. Of course, most of it was based on suspicion and Rose's hunches, but somehow, Rose's hunches (the real ones she made when she was being serious) had an uncanny way of coming true. He hoped fervently that this one wouldn't – for Neville's sake.

It was one-thirty-three now and the house-elves were almost finished. And Ron was very worried now. *This isn't like her*, he thought, *she wouldn't have kept me worrying – and she knows how I worry, too – for something so serious*. Ought he to check up on her? But what if she was just busy right now... what if she had a very good reason for not contacting him? Now, *that* would be like her. Rose had a real genius when it came to developing strategy and tactics – long-term, spur-of-the-moment, impromptu you name it. It was probably a combination of inherited tendencies – no wonder her father had risen so quickly through the ranks of Aurors, with his superior strategic analysis techniques – as well as from experience – Rose loved bossing people around.

Should he run the risk of calling her, just to check up on her, and risk ruining whatever plan she was executing? Dare he run such a risk?

*“That’s your problem, Ron – you never take any risks.”*

*“And you and Neville take too many. I’d like to live to a ripe old age, thank you very much Rose, and die safely in bed.”*

*“You win some, you lose some. It’s not called life if there’s no risks involved. It’s simply called existence then.”*

*I’ll do it*, he thought, feeling very nervous. *It’s not like this was ever entirely safe, even if Rose tried to convince me it was while we were planning this out. Drat her!*

He pulled out the dilapidated little oval mirror from his pocket and said clearly into it, “Rose Potter.” His fingers shook on its delicate porcelain stem, entwined with ghastly-pale china roses. The surface of it cleared and the background of the Ravenclaw Common Room, elegantly blue, was replaced by a view of a... ceiling? It was a high, elaborately carved stone ceiling with gargoyle-shaped cornices, the ceiling of the Slytherin Common Room he guessed. But... why was he staring at it?

*The only I’d be able to see the ceiling*, he argued to himself, taking in the shock, *was only if the mirror was reflecting the ceiling. And the only way the mirror would do that was if it was placed flat on the floor*

*under the ceiling, facing straight up to it. But why would Rose do that? She'd have kept it in her pocket wouldn't she?*

He frowned, concentrating on the mirror. There was something black and thin spread across his lovely view of the ceiling. He peered closer at it – it wasn't a crack in the ceiling, it looked oddly separate from the rest of the view, incongruent. It was a... no, it couldn't be. But could it? He was so close to the surface of the mirror that the tip of his long nose was touching the cool glass, his eyelashes fluttering down close to it. It was a tendril of human hair – he was sure of it, now. Black hair, not too long by the looks of it and...

*It's Rose's, he thought, suddenly terrified, and she's lying next to it, she must be. And um, she's staring up at the ceiling with the mirror next to her and she hasn't contacted me, even though she should have and...*

An icy thought stopped him dead in his tracks. Rose was lying on the floor of the Slytherin Common Room, next to a two-way mirror. The only possible explanation for that, could be...

*No, he thought, ferociously trying to keep those thoughts at bay and failing superbly, No! She can't be, she isn't dead! I won't believe it, I won't – she can't be, she isn't...*

His head was swirling with thoughts, half-complete, scattered, terrified, and there was a cold icy hand pressing down his heart and throat and he wanted to throw up but he couldn't move, he was plastered to his place, hardly breathing, nauseous, and overwhelmed with feelings that slammed into him like the brick wall he'd crashed into when he was seven (or rather, which Rose had crashed them both into)... Rose. The vision of a pale, scrawny eleven-year-old with black bangs falling into her sharp green eyes, hands on her hips and scowling angrily swam up to the front of his consciousness.

*You imbecile!* She was howling at him, looking quite indignant. *Don't just sit there like an idiot – do something!*

It worked like a catalyst. He bolted up from his place and grabbed a house-elf at random. "Is Dumbledore back?" he gasped, feeling quite wild.

The house-elf looked up at him, puzzled and was about to answer before Ron finally lost it and bellowed with all his might, "No – I need him! It's Quirrell and Neville, Neville Longbottom! They're going to steal the Philosopher's Stone because Quirrell wants it and Neville's going to use his special Boy-who-Lived powers to help him! Yes – that's it! And then Quirrell's going to kidnap him! You have to help me – please, I need you!"

By now, the other house-elves had clustered around him, staring intently as though they feared for his sanity. The looks on their small faces jerked him back to reality with a hard tug – he was being stupid. How were *they* supposed to know anything? "I mean, I mean..." he stammered, taking deep breaths and trying to think of a plan. It would be sheer madness to march down to the third floor corridor now – unarmed, helpless, with a contingent of house-elves hanging onto him. And he wasn't *that* far gone to be even considering such an idea, no he was *not*.

"Does young Master need the Hospital Wing?" an elf asked mildly.

"No!" he howled, losing his train of thought and wildly dancing in place, now seriously considering whether he ought to race down to the third-floor and apprehend Quirrell and Neville by himself. It sounded so *easy* now, but since when had something easy been the right thing to do? No, he was positive it wouldn't work out, he wasn't even going to try to convince himself that it was the only thing he could do when...

"Snape," he whispered, slowly as comprehension dawned on him. He took a deep bracing breath and said quietly, "Humans can't Apparate within Hogwarts." The house-elves nodded together, looking as solemn as him. "But – you're not human," he said in a rush, "Er, sorry but you aren't so that means that you should be able to..." He flailed his arms desperately, but his voice was very soft and earnest as he said, "Please – I need one of you to – to Apparate me down to Snape's office. It's urgent." The look on his face and his tone worked in his favor.

“Miffy will be honored to take young Master,” a house-elf said, emerging from the rest of the crowd and extending a small, long-fingered hand. “If young Master...”

“Right,” Ron said, now weighing his options and speaking as he thought, “I need one of you to go to *each* of the Professors and tell them that they must guard the third floor corridor, that it’s **desperate** – put emphasis on that. Quirrell has infiltrated the protective measures, he’s stealing the Philosopher’s Stone and he’s kidnapping Longbottom as well. Ron Weasley is your informant. And the rest of you who aren’t going to the teachers – guard the third floor corridor yourselves till they arrive. Prevent Quirrell and Longbottom from leaving, secure the Front Doors some of you so that they *can’t* leave and... uh, that’s about it. *Please.*”

For a moment, the house-elves said nothing and Ron was afraid that they’d simply sedate him – somehow – and carry him to the Hospital Wing. Their faces certainly looked that. Then, as one, they pressed their palms together, and bowed gracefully to him, kind, reassuring smiles on their faces. *Everything’s going to be alright, Ron – there’s nothing to worry about.* He almost – almost – felt that way when, with a low *click*, all the house-elves, except Miffy, disappeared to carry out his orders. Perhaps there was hope for his powers of persuasion yet.

He clung onto Miffy’s fingers, a warm, good, *chocolaty* feeling rising in the bitterly freezing pit of his stomach and flushing like heaven-sent manna through his system. Before he knew it, he was in the middle of a stone dungeon, much like the Potions’ Classroom, only smaller and now dark. “*Lux*,” he muttered, and the lamps in the dungeon lit up, revealing it to be an office furnished in the style you could expect only from Severus Snape – plenty of stone, multicolored animal parts twisted up in glass jars in prominent view and lots and lots of black. Morbid, classical gothic style. To Miffy he added, “Please wake up Professor Snape.” It never hurt to be polite.

Ron sank onto a cold stone bench, rubbing his already sweaty hands anxiously and fidgeting restlessly. Maybe Rose wasn’t dead. Maybe they’d catch Quirrell in time. Maybe everything would be alright.

And maybe he’d stop dreaming one day.



A few seconds later, Miffy arrived tugging a zombie forcefully with him. Professor Snape looked in desperate need of caffeine as he arrived, being dragged by Miffy, a candy-pink dressing gown thrown carelessly over electric blue pajamas with wide orange polka-dots. He looked thoroughly useless and for half-a-second Ron was tempted to grab Miffy and just Apparate to London to search for Dumbledore – in whose abilities he placed infinitely more faith. Atleast *Dumbledore* never wore the truly bizarre – and distasteful to the eye – combination of candy-pink-electric-blue-and-orange together at once. Yes, he wore lots of purple and even more of velvet, but *that* didn't make him look so studiously incompetent.

"Weasley?" Snape yawned, rubbing his eyes rimmed with dark circles wearily, looking like he wanted to A-K him but was too sleepy to do so. He caught himself mid-yawn and snapped, more aggressively, "Explain."

The words tumbled out of Ron's mouth, aching to be said, no time left to think, and Snape stopped him mid-sentence with a sleepy, "Slower this time, Weasley."

"Rose is dead," Ron coughed, not knowing if that was the truth. But it had the effect he had wanted – Snape woke up with a vengeance, his eyeballs popping out of their sockets as he groped for his wand, suddenly very pale. "Rose Potter," Ron said, relishing the effect it produced on Snape, "And Quirrell and Neville Longbottom are stealing the Philosopher's Stone now."

Snape stood quite still for a moment. "You expect me to believe this."

"Yes!" Ron snapped, getting to his feet and staring the Potions' Professor straight in the eye and holding his sharp gaze, "I have proof – but we don't have time right now, please..."

Snape held up a hand. "I hope you know that if this all turns out to be some cock-and..."

"I'll be expelled!" Ron yelled, frustrated beyond measure. Didn't this man *understand*? "I know and I'm not..."

Snape considered him carefully for a moment, still looking doubtful. Apparently, he was not used to twelve-year-olds telling him the truth.

"I have the house-elves as sentries around the corridor," Ron said roughly, "You can ask Miffy here – and I have them guarding the Front Doors and waking up the other teachers too. Sir, this isn't..."

"I believe you," Snape said curtly, pulling out his wand and tying up his robes roughly, "Wait, a moment, Weasley. You here, elf, get Jip in the kitchens to Apparate to Professor Dumbledore and alert him. You know the story? Good – we need him *now*, understand?"

Miffy nodded, bowed and vanished with a *click*, his face determined. "Madam Pomfrey," Snape told Ron, now striding firmly out of the dungeons, at a pace that Ron found hard to match. He jumped up the stairs three at a time, calling back over his shoulder, "Alert her as well, and take her to the Slytherin Common Room to check upon Miss Potter. The password is *Cyanide*. Do not attempt to follow us to the third floor – it is too dangerous. Do you understand?"

They were in the Great Hall and now, Snape (without waiting for an answer from the panting Ron trying to keep up with him) openly broke into a run, the tails of his cotton-pink dressing gown trailing behind him, his blue-and-orange pajamas flashing colorfully underneath. At any other time, Ron would have been tempted to laugh. Now, however, he merely took a deep, steadying breath and sprinted towards the Hospital Wing, not even thinking about anything but the task at hand.

**000**

Rose woke up suddenly. Horror enveloped her as she realized what Neville had done. Without waiting to rethink or reconsider or re-anything, she rolled over to her feet, body aching in protest. She slammed out of the Common Room like a whirlwind, ignoring the mirror lying next to her – the mirror through which Ron had seen her hair a scant thirteen seconds earlier and started to panic. Panic caught up with her as she pounded through the dungeons, running faster than she'd ever done before, adrenaline pumping through her veins.

She was trying not to think at all, just running, putting her energy solely in it as she dashed through the stairs like a meteorite. The thoughts flew away from her as she ran, panting at her legs but failing to keep up with her pace. She'd run many races in her life but she'd never run like she was running now – not really running, more like galloping as she'd later say.

She paused just long to let out a rasping breath, as she fumbled with the knob of the forbidden corridor of the third floor. Then, cold reality swept through her, the world catching up with her.

This was sheer, plain *suicide*.

She fell down next to the door, arms wrapped around her knees, retching for breath, trembling like a leaf. She'd met the end of the line now, and there was nothing left to do but *wait*. She checked her watch – it was roughly fifteen minutes since Quirrell and Neville had been inside, one-forty right now, taking all factors into account she was sure it couldn't be less than twelve minutes or more than seventeen since they'd been inside.

On average, to break through the other protective measures that were certainly placed inside – well, Ron had been certain they'd been placed and he knew more about those things than her anyhow – it couldn't take them less than twenty minutes to break through them all, even if they were familiar with them. Roughly twenty minutes atleast. That meant that there were... approximately two minutes or something until Quirrell and Neville burst out with the Stone in tow.

Not enough time to call for help. Just enough time to prepare for a showdown. Endgame.

She stood up, legs like jelly and backed away slightly from the door. She rubbed her sweaty palms on her jean-clad thighs, licked her dry lips and stiffened her spine. She brought up her wand to the optimum position for dueling – Uncle Padfoot had told her all about dueling tactics and maneuverings when she was seven but she'd forgotten most of it, now she wished she still remembered it – facing for the other person's heart, your own arm drawn a little back, calm, steady and concentrating on the spells you would use and some ready counter-curses too.

Damn, she didn't know *any* counter-curses. Well, not ones that would be effective against a fully-grown wizard and a possessed boy whom she didn't want to hurt.

*Inflatus. Spiculum. Petrificus Totalus. Stupefy.* Damn again, she'd never cast a Stunning Curse in her life. It would be effective, yes, but she didn't want to trust on a beginner's luck to cast a powerful spell. *That* usually had terrible side-effects.

Just as she was about to start panicking and losing the vestige of calm that she had barely managed to cling onto, the door slid open. Two dark figures, barely illuminated by the dull lamplight and duller moonlight, stood in the dark arch. Belatedly, Rose remembered that it would have been useful to have cast a *Lumos*, but there was no time for regrets now.

She roared the first three hexes she had in mind together, without giving Neville and Quirrell any time to react, with the element of surprise on her side. The *Inflatus* missed Quirrell by inches, a bright sunburst hitting the stone wall behind his head by inches. For a moment, his pale, haggard face – unturbaned, startlingly – was thrown into high relief in the darkness, mouth opening into a scream. The second hex – boil-forming – hit Neville square in the face and he roared and fell down. The third missed them both entirely.

Rose didn't stop to admire the effect she'd caused. With a Seeker's trained reflexes, she rolled onto the floor, ducking out of harm's way just as a jet of green light was sent her way, missing her right hand by centimeters. She shivered as the *Avada Kedavra* scraped by her and ducked behind a suit of armor. It caught fire and she screamed in surprise and pain as her arms scraped the hot iron, scrambling out from behind it and emerging in a patch of brilliant moonlight. *Damndamndamndamn.*

She toppled down, hit by a full Body-Bind Curse, before she could hide. She lay quite still in the bright light as Quirrell and Neville arrived – apparently Quirrell had already performed the counter curse for the boils erupting on Neville's face. The man and the boy loomed over her, both pale, the boy's eyes gleaming scarlet. *Scarlet?*

And then, a high cold voice, as spine-chilling as the voice of death and causing little goosebumps of fear to slide over Rose's skin, hissed, piercing through the silent night like a finely-sharpened blade slashing through a body. "Finish her off, Neville. It is your honor, your duty."

Quirrell was shaking, actually shaking, and he looked like he was going to be sick. But Neville... his face was a cold, stony mask as his arm rose obediently. And Rose could do nothing, lie helpless, staring up in horror at the face of the boy she'd thought she knew everything about. A last foolish hope clung to her, still, a whisper – *He won't do it. He's not a killer – he's only Neville. He...*

"Avada Kedavra," Neville said, his voice oddly flat and mechanical, wand pointed at Rose's face. There was a crackle, like a malfunctioning wand, and a weak spurt of frog-green light – not acid-green – hit Rose's nose. It broke with a nasty *snap* and blood spurted over her face, trickling acidly into her open mouth. It hurt, yes, but... was that it?

Quirrell looked staggered. Neville looked like a snowbank – emotionless, coldly serene.

But before anything else was done or said, there was a sudden *click* and the floor was full of house-elves, house-elves who surrounded Rose and Quirrell and Neville. Rose felt like she might faint from shock.

The house-elves began to shriek, their tiny shrill voices mingling to create a nauseating, piercing effect that effectively blocked out all meaning their words could have, leaving only a feral, unbearable *noise*, making Rose want to shove her fingers into her eardrums (like Quirrell was doing). Even Neville winced, looking more human.

*What are they doing*, Rose thought bewilderedly, as Quirrell and Neville suddenly stiffened and stood still in their places, like stone statues. *Are they being... petrified to their places?*

It certainly looked like that – Quirrell and Neville were not breathing now, they stood stock still, their eyeballs not moving at all. Stone

Statues. Solid, *selective* petrification that had no effect on her. *House-elves rock*.

She heard a noisy clattering up the stairs and felt like laughing with joy. Help was on the way and she wasn't going to die!

Before help arrived however, there was an odd, strange shriek of rage in the same cold, high voice that had stupefied her earlier that evening and addressed Neville later on. Quirrell's shoulders began to shake, but the rest of his body stood still, held by the elves' enchantments. A silvery *something*, insubstantial, airy, featureless, like a flimsy cloud or an opaque mist floated out from his body – through his forehead – and hung over the elves and Rose for a moment. Then, like a draught of freezing-cold air, it whooshed suddenly away, through the windows just as the teachers and elves clattered noisily on.

Even held by the elves' enchantments, Quirrell silently flopped onto the floor in a dead faint. And Rose, too, suddenly unable to bear it any longer – the strain, the elves' magic which was beginning to stop being selective, her broken nose, the bruises blossoming on her back, the fear, the tension, the cold, silvery-white *thing* that terrified her – fainted, still caught in the Body-Bind Curse.

## The Aftermath

*Then what makes us all different? Is there any right, any wrong, anywhere? How do you define it? Where are the limits? Are there any limits?*

### Ch 34

It was like waking up from a hangover. Of course, she'd never experienced a hangover in her life, but she knew how it was supposed to feel like, theoretically – courtesy of Uncle Padfoot whose fourth year had apparently been one gloriously, painfully protracted stupor, induced by an overload of girlfriends, alcohol and Howlers from home.

Her head felt like a freshly-stuffed eiderdown quilt, her tongue was dry and prickly together and hung heavily in her parched mouth. Her stomach was grumbling and through it all, her whole body managed to keep up a *voluble* protest with creaking bones, freezing toes, just-healed nose snapping indignantly. A fine, sharp line of fiery pain cut through it all, originating from her woolly-feeling head, and spreading through her weak abdomen to the tips of her quaking toes. It didn't particularly *hurt* so much as it made her want to throw up the remnants of her little dinner – she'd been too worried to eat well that night.

Rose reached consciousness in a haze of nausea. Before she was even fully awake, just awake enough to acknowledge her unsatisfied body, she vomited.

There were soft noises, a little cry, robes rustling across the floor and then cool fingers were pressing into the side of her head, holding it up properly, someone's arm tucked securely around her waist, low, soothing murmurs that reminded her of Mum. She retched and retched, the revolting stench of vomit making her eyes sting in fresh pain. It stopped finally and she collapsed into the arms of the woman holding her. She'd hoped – foolishly, perhaps – that it would be Mum but no, the stiff, cool bosom against which she fell into did not remind her at all of Mum's. It smelt faintly of dried rose petals and that was lovely, lovelier than the stink of sick at least, but it wasn't Mum and

she wanted Mum so badly, she *needed* her with a hard, desperate ache, a longing, a passion...

She began to cry, tears springing of their accord. The woman kept on saying soft, gentle things to her, very soothingly, as she began cleaning up the place and Rose as well. Two strong, warm arms wrapped themselves around her small body and then she was standing next to a bed – her eyes dimly registering the fact that she was in the Hospital Wing and that it was still night – while the woman cleaned her up, wand swishing silently over her.

"There now, dearie," the woman said softly, only just audibly, "It's been a rough night for you, I know darling, so you just go right back to bed and..."

"No," Rose mumbled, eyes shut, half-leaning against the woman, exhausted beyond measure, sapped of nearly all her willpower but still strong enough to know that sleeping was the last thing she should be doing right now. It was the easy thing to do. And the easy thing to do was never the right thing. "No – I need to know. I need to see him."

The woman pulled her down gently, so that she was sitting on the bed. Her voice rang with soothing insincerity as she cooed, "A nice little spoonful of Sleeping Potion and you'll be as fit as a fiddle in the morning – trust me, dearie, you'll find out everything then."

"I won't," Rose mumbled, pushing off the woman, forcing her eyes to open. She stared the woman, Madam Pomfrey, into the eye, biting her lips to force back a yawn. "Nobody'll tell me anything, I know. I don't need your lies, damn you, I need the truth." It was courtesy of her advanced state of fatigue that she had the nerve to talk to an adult like that.

"Miss Potter," Madam Pomfrey said, sounding less soft and dove-like now, "I must insist..."

"*I must insist?*" Rose shrieked, jumping to her feet and nearly stumbling and falling to the floor. "Who do you think you are? Either you take me to Neville or I'll... I'll get to him myself!"



She caught sight of her wand lying on the bedside table and drew it, pointing straight between Madam Pomfrey's eyes before the matron had time to react. Her eyes flashed mutinously and suddenly all her weariness fell off as she thought of Neville and Quirrell and Ron and everything else that had happened, the mysterious appearance of the house-elves and teachers, the cold silvery spirit that had floated over the battle-scene in the third floor. Ron was probably worrying about her right now; he didn't know anything now, poor boy. And Neville... she shivered. What was her suffering compared to theirs? *Nothing*.

"I beg your pardon?" a polite voice asked. She heard robes swishing across the floor, and then suddenly the whole room was illuminated by a dim, dull light.

"*Oh*," she had time to mutter before hastily withdrawing her wand. She was intoxicated by exhaustion but even so, she *quite* hadn't reached the level of lunacy where she'd willingly draw a wand on Albus Dumbledore. She was mad, not crazy.

Professor Dumbledore, resplendent in his usual attire of purple velvet with half-moon spectacles and twinkling eyes, smiled benignly down at her as though she were a sweet, harmless little puffskein. Madam Pomfrey in a decadently gorgeous brocade dressing robe done in various shades and hues of white, ivory and peach with delicate, pearl-tipped tassels and a crimson silk nightgown flashing underneath frowned disapprovingly at her.

"Mr Longbottom is at present in the same ward as you, as I have no doubt you shall be delighted to hear," Professor Dumbledore said, serenely cheerful. He swept his long-fingered, wrinkled hand towards the window. The bed right next to the window had its curtains drawn about. "Mr Quirrell – Professor no longer – is currently residing at the Ministry of Magic, awaiting a trial for Azkaban that shall take place at noon. He is under close guard by several Aurors, one of whom is your father. Mr Weasley is in his dormitory, sleeping quite soundly I have no doubt, with full knowledge of the events of tonight." He nodded kindly at her as if to ask her whether she wanted any more information.

Rose was practically starving for it. She glanced uncertainly at Madam Pomfrey.

“Poppy – if I might have a moment or two with Miss Potter?” Dumbledore turned to the matron solicitously. “She shall sleep all the better tonight with a mind full of information and a belly full of... perhaps, hot chocolate?”

“Biscuits?” Rose suggested, suddenly very hungry again. She sank to the bed as Madam Pomfrey sulkily nodded and exited the ward. Dumbledore took a seat lightly on the edge of her bed, twiddling his thumbs together and beaming radiantly at her. Rose found the effect quite unnerving. She waited for the door to click shut before starting to open her mouth.

Dumbledore intercepted her and began to tell her the back-story of the night which she had not been present to understand – how Ron had taken charge of the house-elves, how the elves by means of their powerful, ancient magic had bound Neville and Quirrell in place, how the teachers had arrived and taken her and Neville to the Hospital Wing, that she had earned herself fifty points for her unflinching courage and loyalty, how her parents had been informed and that she was not to worry about that little trifle, and how Ron had also been told.

Rose listened intently. Something was bothering her. Dumbledore didn't know half of the things that happened – how Neville's eyes had gleamed scarlet, how he'd shot the Killing Curse at her, about the high cold voice, the silvery essence, how Quirrell had been beguiling Neville throughout the year, Quirrell's motives for the Philosopher's Stone and Neville. So, she began to tell him everything, watching his expression turn graver and darker by the moment. Midway through her recital, Madam Pomfrey arrived with an enormous mug of hot chocolate, a mountain of biscuits and left, looking disgruntled, when Dumbledore waved her away.

Sipping the hot chocolate, munching a biscuit, Rose finished, feeling more alive now. She leaned back against the headrest of her bed and waited for him to talk.

He twiddled his thumbs absently and spoke, a few minutes later, grave but reassuring, "You observe much, Miss Potter – a most admirable quality in one so young." He sighed deeply.

"Only because it was Neville," Rose said softly, "I wouldn't have noticed half as much as I did if it was anyone else – even if it was Ron."

Dumbledore smiled a little. "You are deeply attached to him, I see. Such friendships are very rare, and all the more beautiful and precious for their depth and soul. Do not lose it." He frowned for a moment, considering. "I think it safe to tell you, then – you appear quite wise for your years."

*No I don't – that's Ron's department.*

"It was Lord Voldemort," Dumbledore said quietly. Rose gasped, feeling like she was going to throw up again. "You caught the right criminal, Miss Potter, but you have rather muddled up his motives for his transgression. Quirrell, of his own accord, did not dare aspire for the Stone, nor did he intend to capture your good friend, Mr Longbottom. It was all Lord Voldemort's doing. Tell me, Miss Potter, how much do you know of Lord Voldemort – aside from the fact that he was a megalomaniac with psychopathic tendencies? How much do you know of his present condition, now?"

"He's dead, isn't he?" Rose suggested, in a feeble voice. "Neville killed him off with his Boy-Who-Lived powers when he was a baby. But... Mum and Daddy don't think that. They think he's alive even though loads of people think he's gone for good." She paused for a moment. "I don't think about him at all, really – I don't even know who's right and I didn't really care about it either."

"Few people do, nowadays," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, "They prefer to put the past with its demons behind them. But, your parents are quite right – he is still alive and as it appears from your story, still a force to be reckoned with, if only in the future. If I might deduce correctly from your observations, I believe that it was he who has been, for some years manipulating Quirrell. He is nothing more than mere spirit now and requires a body to possess to be really alive.

That was what he was doing with Quirrell. But a Philosopher's Stone... ah, think of the possibilities then, Miss Potter!"

"He'd be immortal," she whispered, horrified. "He'd have his own body back and he'd..." She stopped, sickened.

"And who should appear this year to be Sorted into Hogwarts, an impressionable first-year, but a certain Neville Longbottom?" Dumbledore asked, "Slytherin – Lord Voldemort's own House. Naturally, his curiosity was aroused – wouldn't yours be? A boy marked by him, Sorted into the same House, a boy perhaps of his own spirit. He was enchanted – and so began the famous tea-parties you have just related. Psychological manipulation – have you ever encountered that term before? No? Well, it means that he was trying to inveigle Mr Longbottom into his own ways, with his own charm and power – though he did use Quirrell as a mouthpiece."

His face darkened and his voice was very low as he said, "With a bit more time, he might even have succeeded in coaxing him. The Boy who Lived as the Dark Lord's apprentice – the idea would indeed have appealed to him on many levels and on many layers. He began to wipe out all his earlier memories, effectively lowering his inhibitions, blurring all his formative education and ideals and hopes and dreams into a dark haze. Memories are powerful, Miss Potter, and the strong, loving memories his childhood had amply supplied him with – many thanks to you and Mr Weasley – would have been very potent in drawing his path. He would never have willingly joined forces with Lord Voldemort if he had memories like those."

"So, he was rubbing off the memories bit by bit so that Neville could finally become one of his clones?" Rose demanded, indignant, "Why that f... er, sorry sir."

"Apology accepted," Dumbledore said graciously, "One does tend to lose one's temper when one is as young and inexperienced of the world's ways as you are, Miss Potter."

"What happened tonight?" Rose asked. "His eyes were flashing red and..."

"*That* was Lord Voldemort," Dumbledore said seriously. "Mr Longbottom was under the Imperius Curse tonight – a very strong one, required only tonight in order to carry out Lord Voldemort's plans to the minute details. Once they were out of the Hogwarts grounds and Lord Voldemort had regained his true form, I have no doubt that it would have been removed, all his memories of childhood erased and replaced with ones chosen by Lord Voldemort."

*SICK.* "So..." Rose frowned, thinking, "He tried to kill me under Imperius – that's alright, then – but... he couldn't? Why?"

"It was beyond his abilities," Dumbledore said simply. "Remember, he was not possessed by Lord Voldemort – that was Quirrell – only under an Imperius Curse. Therefore, he was not in full possession of Lord Voldemort's own powers, only in more superior control of *his* own. An Avada Kedavra, Miss Potter, requires much power. I doubt that any eleven-year-old could ever cast one with complete success – his was unsuccessful. It only broke your nose – I hope it is alright?"

"Just throbbing a little," Rose smiled. "That's alright – I forgive him." She sighed, "When will he wake up?"

"Not for a few days, atleast," Dumbledore said, rising. "I'm sure you're quite tired now – a nice nap looks very inviting, doesn't it?"

"Very," Rose grinned, snuggling up under her covers and handing her empty mug of hot chocolate to him.

"Oh, and Miss Potter?" Dumbledore said, dimming the lights with his wand. "One more thing. I hardly think it necessary but I strongly advise you never to discuss this. Those who know do not need to know any more. Those who do not... Mr Malfoy, your other friends, even your parents do not need to be informed of anything else. Please, keep this to yourself – no matter how much you are begged, threatened or coaxed to tell all. It is only for the best."

*Keep this from Draco? But why?* His bright blue eyes pierced into her own vivid green eyes. Slowly, reluctantly she nodded. "Alright – I swear," she said, meaning it. "And um, I'm sorry if this is a foolish question, but it's been bugging me for a bit now and er, I'd better ask Mum or Daddy but I thought I might ask you and..."

He smiled warmly at her, as though he were reading her mind. “It is our choices that define us, who and what we are, Miss Potter – if that was your question. Wrong and right exist only in the mind – but that, my dear girl, is what counts. A profound question, if I say so myself, for a young lady of your age.”

He smiled, nodded kindly and swept out, the Hospital Ward darkening as he passed. Rose yawned and stretched lazily. The Headmaster was *fabulous*. And there was a Quidditch Match three days from now – the last of the year’s. She’d better get some sleep now.

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*Dear Rosalie,*

*Your mother is in a semi-comatose state. Your godfather is in hysterics. Your little brother is setting up a shrine to worship your little sister. And I, your father, remain the only sane person in the midst of this inexplicable mess.*

*Well, not quite inexplicable if you consider your genes, but just inexplicable enough to send both your mother and your Uncle Padfoot into a state of deep shock. Of course they’ll recover soon enough – and then you’re sure to be flooded with letters from them both, one extolling your virtues to the sky, the other condemning you beneath the earth. I’ll let you figure out who sends you which letter.*

*In any case, I’m sure you don’t need my praise – you’ll get enough from Uncle Padfoot – or my righteous indignation – your mother’s sure to send you enough of that. You just need the facts from me right on. I guess that’s for the best – I don’t know whether to cry or laugh right now. The father-figure part of me strongly urges me to do the former while the young-at-heart, Marauder part of me urges me to perform the latter.*

*Never mind, about that. You’ve been wonderfully plucky, darling, but for all that, I feel like spanking you.*

*I was quite rudely roused from my slumber at 2:29 a.m. the day after the International Council of Warlocks convened to answer a summons to guard a top-security prisoner at the MoM. Four other*

*Aurors were sent and I was naturally, quite unpleasantly surprised, to find that the prisoner (the politically correct term would be trialee or something) was none other than your dear DADA teacher, Professor Quirrell.*

*My duties required recording his answers (not under Veritaserum) for the questionnaire and other comments he might have regarding his crime, for the benefit of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He was sent along with a brief précis of his crime and motives by Dumbledore. Being considerably higher placed than the other Aurors, it was my painful duty to fulfill the duties other than guarding of the prisoner.*

*Well, of course you happened to be mentioned in the précis of the crime and let me say that I hope that you never join the Aurors – or that if you do, you do not have any children. I was thoroughly shell-shocked when I read about your involvement in the case and other particulars regarding Messieurs Weasley and Longbottom. You naughty little girl.*

*The trial was held at high noon, presided by Madam Bones and I had the misfortune to be present again. So was your Uncle Padfoot – to take notes for the Department of Mysteries, I believe – and between the two of us, we deemed to in the best interests of your mother – and the worst interests of you – to inform her about everything.*

*You ought to have seen the pyrotechnics – they would surely have dissuaded you from playing detective later on. Never mind, I'm not blaming you – and no, I'm not praising you, either. I'm still shell-shocked – maybe even more than before. The only thing that I want to do right now is hold my little girl tight and ask her how she grew up so fast. I miss you, my baby, and I can't wait till you come back home to hug you and make sure you're alright – even though I know you are, broken-then-healed nose aside.*

*XOXO,*

*Daddy*

*PS: No, your mother isn't going to discuss this with you. It's supposed to be top-secret and it pretty much was. Quirrell's trial wasn't even*

*held in a courtroom, just in a private office of Madam Bones'. Dumbledore, Madam Bones, me and another Auror, Uncle Padfoot, the Minister and four other very important members were the only ones present.*

**PPS: DON'T TALK ABOUT THIS TO ANYONE!!**

Neville didn't wake up until the morning after the last Quidditch Match of the season: he'd passed out for four straight days without any breaks in between. Rose had checked on him four times every day, regularly: once before breakfast, once after Quidditch practice, once in the mid-afternoon and once at night, aggravating Madam Pomfrey and Draco – who she was hard put to keep in the dark about the whole affair, fending him off with increasingly vaguer explanations that did nothing to satisfy his ferocious curiosity – to no end.

Personally, Rose regarded Neville's blackout as little less than a medical marvel – wasn't he hungry after he'd slept for so long? Didn't he need to go to the toilet? How did you *survive*, comatose for ninety-six hours? How could it be biologically *possible*? Madam Pomfrey's detailed explanations about how his system managed to sustain such an unbroken siesta did nothing to assuage her concern or diminish her awe.

On her dutiful visit to Neville after breakfast, the day after the Quidditch Match, she was met by a brightly bustling Madam Pomfrey who shooed her away from the Hospital Wing with a cheerful, "Yes – he woke up just after you left for breakfast. The Headmaster's in, speaking with him – you can go see him after they've finished their chat. Now, off with you, child, it'll take plenty long for them finish!"

The next fifteen minutes were spent in the most excruciating, delicious agony and Rose spent them pacing the corridor outside the infirmary, alternatively breaking out in spasms of uncontrollable giggles and fits of restlessness that made her chew the ends of her shoulder-length hair.

"Good morning, Miss Potter – my congratulations on your win yesterday. That was a fine spot of Seeking, to be sure."



Rose looked up the length of the long, lean, purple-clad figure, benign countenance firmly in place, in front of her and nearly whooped for joy. She barely had time to utter a breathless “Thanks!” before she rushed into the infirmary, speeding ahead of Madam Pomfrey who smiled and shook her head and pouncing on the bed at the end of the row, in front of the window.

“Missed you too,” Neville barely had time to say before he was engulfed into a hug that would have been bone-crushing if Rose had weighed more than her seventy-odd pounds. Fortunately, for him, Rose barely tipped the scales at seventy-three pounds and it is very, very hard for a person of seventy pounds to crush *anyone’s* bones manually. His arms went around hers warmly, he laughed in his sweet, hiccoughy, *Neville* way into her hair and Rose squeezed back the tears that had begun to brim to her eyelashes.

It was a long time before they let go. It was a longer time before they said anything to each other. Rose sat down, cross-legged, on his bed, squeezing one of his hands and looking at him, while he did the same. There was no need for words – their silence spoke volumes for them.

*“A friend is someone you can talk to. A good friend is someone you can keep quiet with. Your best friend is someone with whom your silences count as much as your words, with whom you can communicate your emotions without words.”*

Daddy had once told her that. He was almost always right.

Neville picked up a Chocolate Frog from the pile next to his bed and unwrapped it carefully before handing it to her. Rose bit into it, relishing the rich, dark chocolate, the filling creaminess and the odd twinge of nostalgia that stole over her. Ron loved Chocolate Frogs. Neville loved Drooble’s Best Bubble Gum. She loved Bertie Botts’ Every Flavor Beans. It had always been like that.

There were others too, whose preferences she knew: Draco worshipped Sugar Quills, you could bribe Hannah with a few Ginger Newts and Ginny was a sucker for Fizzing Whizzbees. They were her friends – even Hannah over whom she’d tyrannized in their childhood – but they weren’t part of her, an extension of her very soul it seemed sometimes, like Ron and Neville. Would they ever be?

Neville was chewing off the paw of a Chocolate Frog too, now. His mouth was full of chocolate as he thickly said, "Dumbledore told me you won the Quidditch Cup yesterday. Brilliant – I always knew you would." His words were casual, of throwaway, easy-talk importance but there was a warning light flickering low in his chocolate-brown eyes. The message was clear: Leave the past well alone.

Rose was only too happy to comply. What had passed had... well, whatever it had, it was past now. Gone. Dead. Zip. Tata, goodbye, see-you, you're dead, I'm burying you in my way you can't hurt me so don't try to follow me. *Bye.*

"It was pretty tame," Rose said easily, sinking into the role she would play. "Against Ravenclaw, you know. So, no Wronski Feints or cobbing – I was a very good little girl."

"Somehow, I find that hard to believe," Neville chuckled, smiling. It was his old, toothy, half smugly arrogant, half adorable two-year-old smile. For a moment she wanted to melt and hug him again. She barely restrained herself.

"Well, I was good for me," she amended quickly. "Did you enjoy your ninety-six-hour long nap?"

"Very refreshing," he said, the light of battle in his eyes. "I bet you didn't enjoy it, though. Or Ron. Or, come to think of it, Quirrell either."

They were skirting on the edge of the issue, straining the boundaries to the furthest, silently daring each other to go beyond the safety of the petty, little day-to-day affairs and light banter. Suddenly, Rose felt harried and miserable again. It just wasn't *fair*. She was eleven years old, not a diplomat well-versed in handling hypersensitive themes. She wasn't even particularly *subtle*.

A braver person would have glided in and handled the situation with tact and delicacy, while still managing to extract valuable information, help Neville feel better and be calm, cool and collected throughout while still being patient, understanding and sweet. But she wasn't brave. She'd always known that, in a sort of way, but now she knew it with a disconcerting clarity that did not depress her.

Oh yes, she could perform Wronski Feints with flair, but that was just because of a lot of practice and even more foolhardiness. Yes, she could flat run out to capture a grown wizard to save her best friend, but that was only loyalty (she doubted she would have done that for anyone except Neville and Ron) and even more foolhardiness. Sure, she could be frank to the point of brutality and her confidence was boundless, but that was her nature and due to a lack of the desirable quality known as *tact*. She wasn't brave, just arrogant and foolhardy.

And because she wasn't brave, she just smiled at Neville and said cheerfully, "He's enjoying a life-term in Azkaban, now. Never mind that now – guess who's on the lead for the House Cup now? *Hufflepuff*. Can you believe it? They're bound to win the House Cup, term ends in five days and they're up ahead of Slytherin by seventy points."

Neville began to laugh and from thence, they launched on froth-light topics, munching on Chocolate Frogs, laughing the sweet morning away.

First Year had been an unconditional blast throughout, even pitted as it had been with heartbreak, strain and fear. Between the darkness of the year, the beauty of precious friendship, joy, laughter had flared, shedding exquisite light over the year, light that quite overwhelmed the darkness.

**A/N: Whew! So, it's finished – at a whooping 198 pages, excluding A/N's in Microsoft Word, Font: Times New Roman, Size: 12. Special thanks to** Varietygirl9143, Desiqtie, SRFan!!, Alexandra, Kike, Bugger, lady clark of books, SpiderLily, Lady Silverhawk, kaze-tsuki, Princess of Lightning, potterinu, Snakkhammer, dishrag-chan, sy8, Airlady, RavenStar84, LadyAlmondstar **and to everyone else who's taken the time to review! I couldn't have done it without you guys!**

**To everyone – lurkers, regular reviewers, silent people who've reviewed a maximum of twice in 36 chapters, everyone who has this on their favorite list – please, please review!**

## Year II: Circles within Circles

### ***The Diary***

Tigress proudly bare thy fang,  
Hidden among the Daybreak Roses.  
A deadly slayer of the dark,  
*Shades of Black: Beware!*

Unnoticed by the constant war,  
A seed was scattered across the roses.  
Shades of black turn to red,  
*Slayer of Light: Beware!*

### **Anonymous**

“Not a bad attempt on the whole, my boy, not bad at all – but still a little rusty. You want to put in a bit less force, loosen your arm a little more and *focus*. Do it once more for me and then you’re dismissed for the morning. Right then, shall we begin Romulus? Levitate that book and bring it here to me, *gently* – you may now begin.”

Rodolphus Lestrangle readjusted his reading spectacles and nodded encouragingly at his nephew. Romulus raised his wand and was just about to begin when the door was flung violently open. He started and turned to face the tall, excited woman standing in the archway. She clutched something protectively to her chest, her hair and robes billowing in disarray about her as if she’d just been running. Panting, she leaned against the doorway, face flushed and eyes unnaturally bright.

Her husband ignored her and coolly nodded towards his nephew, “Proceed, Romulus.”

The boy scrunched up his face in concentration, then pointed his wand towards the teak, Victorian side-table, where the book *Les Misérables* rested. It was one of his uncle’s favorite books, which didn’t mean much in itself though really. His uncle had a lot of favorite books, being a passionate booklover. Obediently, the novel rose gently into the air and then, discordant with its earlier grace of

movement, zoomed through the air at top-speed to land with a loud *thump* on Rodolphus' ebony writing desk.

Bellatrix clapped sardonically. Romulus blushed in embarrassment. "Better than before," Rodolphus said calmly, "Practice makes perfect, after all. Remember that, my boy. Dismissed." Romulus performed a courtly, turn-of-the-sixteenth-century bow and then backed out of the room, shutting the door softly behind him.

"What a delightful, little lap-dog you've raised." Bellatrix laughed mockingly, advancing towards her husband while swinging her hips lazily, her heavy, dark robes dragging against the velvety, cream-rust Persian carpet. "You might just be able to sell off at a profit at the Magical Menagerie – that is if they take in wretched, little mutes." She was right in front of him now; one pale, long-fingered hand resting delicately on the writing desk, the other fisted tightly, holding something.

"The class of wit I would expect from an inexperienced sixteen-year-old," Rodolphus said dismissively, rummaging through his drawers for a quill and parchment. "Run off and play your games, little Bella, there are matters of the estate that must be looked over now. I intend to enjoy my holiday in the United States quite thoroughly, but for that I must work hard now. Don't pout, my sweet child."

Bellatrix scowled ferociously. "Work?" She demanded contemptuously. "What work? Piddle over the papers you've been staring at for the past twenty years! What estate? A few dilapidated castles, a couple of whorehouses and vineyard-breweries!"

"Tut-tut, Bella, I sold the whorehouses away at a pretty profit when you were an infant in swaddling-clothes. Clever creature, the man I sold them to – Emerich Smith, I think you know him," Rodolphus smiled reminiscently, lounging indolently in his armchair. "He's never forgiven you, I believe, for your murdering his brother and sister-in-law and branding his precious, little nephew."

"You keep track of the news, I see," Bellatrix said idly, regaining some of her earlier insouciance now that Rodolphus had set out the mood of their meeting as light and informal. "Put away your work, my dear, and listen to me a while."

“Draco told me,” Rodolphus chuckled, putting away his documents. “Hates young Zacharias Smith to the core – you’ll be pleased by that. A year at school has done him quite well – he acts more like his father every day.”

“As I feared he would,” Bellatrix muttered darkly. “Accursedly bourgeoisie like all the Malfoys, that’s what he’ll turn into one day. There’s precious little of Cissy in the boy. Look here now, Rodolphus.” She placed a slim, brown diary on his desk very gently. “What do you make of this?”

Rodolphus stared at the diary skeptically. “You’ve taken to belles-lettres as your mother wished you would, twenty years ago,” he suggested brightly. “Though I must say, your taste in diaries is filthy at best.”

“*Imbecile*,” she murmured under her breath. Then, she shook her head, flashing him a dazzling smile. “No, darling – but let me give you a hint. I borrowed it from one of the vaults in Lucius’ subterranean passageway. A Level III vault.”

“Guarded by security trolls, encrypted by blood protection and... *Geminio* and *Flagrante* curses placed on the chamber, yes?” Rodolphus turned to her for assurance. “I’ve rarely visited Level III – I usually keep to Level II.”

“How fares your Muggle bitch?” Bellatrix asked sarcastically. “I’m astonished she’s survived for as long as she has, under you – it’s been... two years since you had her deposited there, no? Anyhow, it doesn’t matter – guess what this is.” She sounded like an eager four-year-old for a moment.

“Decidedly dark, perhaps fatal, and if glimpsed outside of select company - enough to send us all to Azkaban, money and position notwithstanding? That’s the sort of thing Lucius prefers to keep in Level III, I believe.”

“You’re turning old, my love,” Bellatrix laughed. “It would have saved time if I’d just given it to Draco with my instructions.”

Rodolphus raised his eyebrows inquiringly. "You would put this sort of thing in the hands of your dear sister's son? I thought you loved Narcissa more than that."

"I wouldn't spare my own sons if the Dark Lord needed their lives," Bellatrix said mercilessly, eyes gleaming with a fanatic light. "I'd rip them apart, barehanded, if it was required of me. Why should I care to spare Cissy's son?"

"It makes me quite thankful I have no heirs of my own," Rodolphus said. "I should hate for them to be dismembered by their own mother. But do tell me more about this fascinating object you intend to place in the hands of a twelve-year-old, it sounds quite enthralling. I fear, however, it is my duty to inform Narcissa and Lucius of the sociopath, hot on their son's trail."

"This won't harm Draco," Bellatrix explained patiently. "And it's not meant for him." She smiled coldly. "Has he told you of the intriguing company he's keeping at school nowadays?"

"The Boy-Who-Lived and James Potter's daughter?" Rodolphus asked. "He's full of stories about the charming Mr Longbottom and the fair Miss Potter. If she's anything at all like her scheming Mudblood mother, she might just manage to taint his bloodline by bequeathing him an heir. Is that what you are afraid of? Do you intend to send *that* to the child?"

"Draco has been brought up properly," Bellatrix said frigidly. "He would dispose of any child a Mudblood gave him. Or I would for him. You demean him by voicing such doubts on his character."

"It hardly matters how strong his character is and how proper his upbringing is if the girl's both pretty and cunning," Rodolphus chuckled. "I ought to know – didn't I marry you?"

"This isn't for the girl," Bellatrix said, regaining her calmness. "It's for Neville Longbottom."

"Not *another* inane attempt to bring back the Dark Lord!" Rodolphus groaned theatrically, holding out his hands in protest. "Bella, sweet, little Bella, *when* will you accept the fact that he is dead and gone and

nothing you can do will bring him back? When will you turn back to your old life and leave behind the glories of your maidenhood?"

"Don't be a fool," Bellatrix snapped. "I would have waited with this... plan, but there isn't time. You know there isn't, not for me anyhow."

"The Ramsey case?" Rodolphus yawned. "Phew, dearest, that's all just Lucius making a mountain out of a molehill again. What evidence is that charming, righteous young lady, Miss Ramsey, going to work upon when she reopens the old Weasley-Smith-Bones case, that's been rotting in its coffin peaceably for the last six years?"

"Memories," Bellatrix said coldly. "I don't know the exact technique, but apparently the Ramsey girl has found out some way to bring back Obliviated memories. Lucius is worried. Madam Bones, and half of the Department of Mysteries, is on *their* side. That is enough for me to know my time is nearly up."

"We're going to America next week," Rodolphus reminded her idly. "We'll have a nice little tour of the country and the Salem Witches' Institute, Draco will get into some scrape or the other, Narcissa will flaunt the latest British fashions, Lucius will contract some shady deals on the sidelines, your mother shall turn up her nose at everything, I shall gather enough source material for a few monographs, and you shall sulk. Everything will be quite normal and when we get back here, the whole storm will have died off and Miss Ramsey will learn, the hard way, that it does not *do* to meddle in the affairs of her betters."

"It never hurts to prepare for emergencies," Bellatrix said coolly. "I've talked to Lucius and he thinks it's a good plan. This diary, my love, once belonged to the Dark Lord."

Rodolphus sat up straighter.

"A Horcrux," Bellatrix smiled broadly. "I've performed tests to ascertain that it is so. Handing it to Neville Longbottom..." She looked like fangs were going to spring out of her grin.

"Sweet Morgana," Rodolphus murmured. "Bellatrix are you..."



“Test it for yourself if you wish,” Bellatrix chuckled. “Lucius did. Good, I have your attention now, don’t I? Now this is what I’ll do. Longbottom was born on the 30th of July. Today is the 11th. I’ll give it to Draco – embellish the cover perhaps to make it more attractive – and *suggest* that it would be an ideal birthday present. I won’t mention any dates but I’m quite positive no one else in his year will have a birthday in late July – none of the children I know have one. Then, I shall leave the rest to him. The effect, I believe, will be slow but long lasting. What do you make of this?”

Rodolphus was silent, calculating shrewdly now. “I see no danger in it,” he said carefully. “But suppose...”

“A twelve-year-old know what a Horcrux is!” Bellatrix roared with laughter. “I’d like to see the child send it to the Department of Mysteries for confirmation, I would! You don’t know children, Rodolphus – except for that mute, little mongrel you like to keep about you, of course. The boy will ignore it at first, and then when he’s had a tiff with one of his friends, when he’s sad or angry and about to bury the toils and cares of his petty, little life in tears in the comfort of his pillow, he’ll discover the little, old diary tucked up in his trunk. He is the Boy-Who-Lived, yes, but he is also a child still.”

**000**

*July 15th, 1992*

*Dear Rose,*

*Happy, early birthday! All of us – Mother, Father, Aunt Bella, Uncle Rodolphus, and Grandmother – are starting out for the United States of America, tomorrow. We’re going to spend a month touring the country. Do you remember I told you? The mansion is a complete mess right now, Father and Uncle Rodolphus are cleaning up their affairs, Mother is packing her entire wardrobe, and Aunt Bella’s in an awful mood, hexing random house-elves and prowling the corridors all night. Aunt Bella in a bad mood is bad news. Aunt Bella in an awful mood is even worse. It’s a bit scary, really.*

*I’m staying with Grandmother right now, which is for the best, I guess, because the adults all think I’m running underfoot. Bah, like I’m a*

*three-year-old or something. Her house is very beautiful, but it's exhausting staying there – she's very strict about etiquette and protocol and I'm barely allowed to do anything. No running or speaking loudly, nothing must be disturbed from its proper place, formal attire for supper, and no swearing or coarse words. (She thinks the words STUPID and WHATEVER are coarse!!) She promised me she'd wear out my back with a rawhide whip if I didn't behave myself – it used to be an oak pointer when I was smaller. Bah again.*

*I miss you and Neville a lot – he's holidaying in Scotland, right? I sent a letter and his birthday present to him yesterday – I won't have time to do that in America. The present is awesome; I chose it long ago, even before the summer vacation started. Neville's pretty 'artsy', so I sent him a photography kit consisting of fifteen rolls of special film, two cameras (one for precision, focusing on close-ups, one for landscape shots, for faraway shots,) with built-in editing techniques, tutorials, and support included. It's bloody brilliant, I tell you – Grandmother helped me pay for it. She's pretty strict about behavior, but she's very generous with money. Maybe that's because I'm her only grandson and she has a lot of money.*

*Your gift is enclosed here – it's a diary and a set of seven quills. The quills are eagle-feather, peacock-feather, swan-feather, phoenix-feather (yes, you can get them), ostrich-feather and dragon-scale. The seventh one is spun out of silk fermented from unicorn hair. I thought you'd like it, Grandmother told me girls like diaries and that it's a feminine trait to keep a diary. I thought about sending it to Neville actually, because the photography kit was really expensive, but then Grandmother stepped in with funds and I didn't think he'd like it half as much as the kit so I bought the kit for him and the diary and quills for you. I hope you like them.*

*How's Snidget? Send me photos of her and write to me soon.*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*Draco A. Malfoy*

“Look at the pwetty owl, Snidget – she’s sweet, isn’t she? But not as sweet as you!” Rose kissed her one-month-old sister’s soft, little cheek warmly, for the nineteenth time that morning.

“It might bite her,” Harry said, scowling at Polyxena who was perching innocently on the windowsill of Snidget’s nursery. “Send it away.”

“Scaredy-cat,” Rose said, making a face at him. She untied the bulging parcel from Draco’s owl’s leg and threw her a couple of crackers that she had stowed in her pocket. Rose and Harry were practicing juggling with crackers to entertain Snidget. Polyxena hooted contentedly and flew off, long wings cutting sharply through the balmy summer morning. Rose chuckled, simply because the day was beautiful and she was very happy now (it was impossible to be unhappy whenever Snidget was around). She opened the parcel, rummaging through it to bring out a thick, creamy envelope, a long, glossy, jet-black case, and a slender, emerald-green, velvet diary, embellished with two intertwining, glassy-eyed, silver serpents.

It was a pretty diary and Rose gently placed it in reach of Snidget’s tiny, flailing, rosy fists, watching the baby stroke the soft, velvet cover in approval. She opened the case and saw seven, very expensive-looking quills neatly arranged in a line on miniature, black velvet cushions with silver tassels. The interior of the case smelt faintly of roses. Rose grinned amused, ripping open the envelope for the letter. Birthday gifts. And from Draco, too. Lovely boy, he was; she had underestimated his qualities. He had excellent taste – the quills were stunning and the diary was quite pretty too. Of course *she* didn’t write in diaries – that was for girly girls like Hannah – but Snidget seemed to like the cover of the diary, so it served some purpose.

Mum arrived while Rose was reading the letter, her long, dark red hair pinned up in a messy ponytail that accentuated her radiant eyes and sweet, pretty face. “Naptime for Snidget,” she chuckled, scooping the baby up from the play-mat where she’d spent the morning being worshipped by her brother and sister. “Outside you two! It’s a fine, sunny day, you shouldn’t spend it cooped up in the house – who sent you that, Rose?” She was looking disapprovingly at the obviously expensive case of quills that was lying open at Rose’s feet.

“D.A.M.,” Rose grinned, snapping the case shut. She picked up the diary and the case and tickled Snidget’s chin as she said, “My secret admirer.”

Mum raised an eyebrow. “Fascinating,” she said dryly. “You have extravagant taste in lovers, Rose.”

“Or Draco’s grandmother spoils him too much,” Rose said, kissing Snidget’s forehead and laughing as the baby’s fingers curled around her nose. “Nighty-night, Snidggy-Widggy.”

“Yuck,” Harry commented, sounding disgusted. “That sounds *stupid*. I made up her nickname – you’re supposed to stick to it, not start calling her Snidggy-Widggy or something like that.”

Mum straightened her grip on Snidget, and chuckled, “Off with you two, now! I don’t want to see either of you inside before lunchtime.”

“Come on, Harry-wiggles,” Rose laughed, throwing an arm over her little brother’s shoulders as she sauntered down the hall. “Let’s go raid the kitchen.”

Harry was prepared to raid the kitchen at any time of day and night. Shaking Rose off, he scampered down the hallway and the stairs as fast as his laughably short – to Rose – legs would carry him. She bounded after him, overtaking him easily, and swept down the banisters to wait for him to reach her at the bottom. He frowned moodily up at her and childishly demanded, “Why are you always so *fast*? It’s not fair.”

“Neither is life, Tiny,” Rose said smugly, mussing up his dark-red hair. She strode towards the kitchen. Harry trailed after her, adjusting his glasses. It was a funny thing, really, that Rose was her father all over except for the eyes and Harry was his mother all over except for the eyes.

He’d inherited poor vision that his mother would not let him repair magically and a childhood of kids taunting him by the clichéd, though still much-despised epithet ‘Four-Eyes’ (though Rose would usually bash up his tormentors). Rose thanked God whenever she was in a

grateful mood that she'd escaped the glasses and had inherited the only feature of her face that she liked – her mother's stunning eyes.

"Okay, we have fifteen minutes to clear out this place. Then we scam – I'll take the stuff to the tree-house and *you* will get me that new book about the Falmouth Falcons and whatever else you need," Rose said, rummaging for a big bag to pile the food in. Harry saluted her, grinning, and then tore through the kitchen like a whirlwind, tossing packets of biscuits and sweets and bottles of lemonade and iced pumpkin juice into the bag. Rose packed loafs of bread, mayonnaise, tuna-and-bacon filling, peanut butter, sauce and crisps, working more methodically and quickly.

"That's enough," Rose said after ten minutes had gone by. "Good timing, Four-Eyes. Now get me my book and, um, if you can find it the latest edition of *The Quibbler*. I think it's in my room."

"Then it's going to be impossible to find," Harry sighed, scuttling off.

"Watch your manners, young man!" Rose roared after him, mimicking her mother. Harry chuckled from down the hallway. Rose smiled and swung herself up on one of the kitchen counters, looking outside at the sunlit lawn dreamily. Daddy and Uncle Moony were outside, laughing and talking animatedly. Daddy's eyes were alight and Uncle Moony's broad smile stretched from ear to ear. They looked like young boys.

Uncle Moony had arrived in late June – he was officially Snidget's godfather just like Uncle Padfoot was hers and Uncle Peter was Harry's – and would stay with them until the end of August for a 'sabbatical' as he'd laughingly termed it. Uncle Moony's job was researching Magical Creatures, a project he'd undertaken under Hogwarts' funding since after the end of the First War against Voldemort.

So far, he'd written five books, an encyclopedia that was part of the Hogwarts' and Beauxbatons' syllabus for Care of Magical Creatures, a detailed collection of essays on the mating and breeding habits of unicorns, a book about dragons as depicted in various cultures all over the world, a coffee-table book with brilliant pictures that Harry

loved and most recently, an autobiography of sorts *Hairy Snout, Human Heart* published under a nom de plume.

*Hairy Snout, Human Heart* was still going strong – and not just in Britain either – and the presumed author of the series (W.W. Waggawagga) was a celebrity among romantic young girls. Werewolves and lycanthropy, according to *Witch Weekly*, were the now ‘in’.

Rose thought Uncle Moony was simply fascinating – one of the rare opinions on which both she and Harry concurred. In fact, he tied in with Uncle Padfoot in second place on her list of the ten men she admired most.

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“You’re going to be alright,” Ginny said for the fifteenth time that morning, stroking his arm awkwardly. She said it like she’d said it the last fifteen times, as if she was trying to convince herself more than him, her tone anything but reassuring. At any other time, Ron would have slipped into older-brother mode - wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder and making a small joke, perhaps, to cheer her up and to lighten the atmosphere with laughter. At the very least, he would have squeezed her hand, been warm, strong, and supportive to make her feel better, and put aside his own fears for her.

Now, he was too moody to do anything but offer a sulky half-shrug, pushing her off his arm. He stared out of the window of the Knight Bus, listening to Aunt Muriel snore peacefully behind them. In a rare moment of magnanimousness, Ginny had offered him the window-seat. In a rarer moment of touchy-feely-ness, she had clung like a desperate little puffskein to his arm. At any other time, he would have appreciated this sweet show of affection. However, now it did nothing to improve his mood and lessen his fear – the churning feeling in the pit of his stomach that told him that he would be sick very soon – or the oceanic roar in his ears. Instead of being comforted by his little sister, he was annoyed.

*I wish Hermione were here*, he thought savagely, *Her or Padma, or even Michael*. He didn’t wish for Rose – in fact he’d expressly forbidden her from accompanying him – or Neville, dear as they were.

That was the problem, really – they were just too... close. Too near the epicenter, capable of really understanding him now and feeling his pain with the same fierce emotion, extra baggage attached to it so that it was just *bigger* than what it should be, shaking him to the very core. Too close for comfort.

He pressed his face against the windowpane, watching the houses zoom by - but not really watching - just hoping to distract himself, but failing.

“Goff’s Oak!” The conductor of the Knight Bus called out. Aunt Muriel jumped up on cue and shrieked, “Wait, wait – that’s ours! Oh, Ronald, Ginevra!”

She swung her large, molding, purple handbag fiercely – striking a small wizard on his shining, bald head – and grabbed Ron and Ginny, flying to the doors, shrieking to the conductor to ‘wait, wait, *please* wait for the love of Merlin’s beautiful, china dogs...’

“No problems’m,” the conductor said, stepping smartly out of her way, as she charged towards him – Handbag of Doom flying.

“19 Roseborough Lane,” Aunt Muriel read out from a dirty slip of paper, which she fished out from her voluminous handbag, when they had finally gotten off the bus. “Turn left, then... mmm. Very well then, come along Ronald, Ginevra – no dawdling, please.”

For some reason, Ginny insisted on holding Ron’s hand, her wide, brown eyes soft and scared, as they set off behind Aunt Muriel. Ron could have thrown her off, but he didn’t. Alternatively, he could also have squeezed her fingers, but he didn’t. Aunt Muriel attracted stares from people as they marched through the village, on account of her long, golden-brown robes, green high heels, and yellow witches’ hat, embedded with twinkling gems.

“19 Roseborough Lane,” Aunt Muriel finally said, smiling with satisfaction as they reached a house on the outskirts of the village. It was a pretty house, one of the largest in the village, with icing-pink walls, white gabled roofs, and a beautiful garden, overflowing with flowers in full bloom – especially roses. There was a swing on the

porch and a woman was sitting on it, looking up at the tall man standing next to her.

“That’s Sirius!” Ginny said in surprise, looking at the man.

“The Department of Mysteries is, of course, involved in the case, Ginevra,” Aunt Muriel said, opening the front gate and stepping up the graveled path. The woman saw them and stood up, a welcoming smile on her face as she strode down the porch towards them.

“Hello Ron, Ginny, Mrs. Prewett,” the woman acknowledged them easily; “I hope you had a pleasant journey. Thank you so much for coming.” She wasn’t a pretty woman, Ron noticed, not in the conventional way, no. Her shoulder-length hair was brown, but too light to be of an appealing color. Her pale blue eyes were too wide and set too far apart. She was plump and her heart-shaped face was decidedly plain. But she had a very sweet, warm, genuine smile – a smile that somehow, in an odd way, reminded him of Rose and her mother – and her eyes were kind and gentle, like her soft voice.

“Miss Ramsey?” Aunt Muriel asked, as Sirius waved at Ron and Ginny from the porch, inviting them to come over and test the swing. Ron smiled, shook his head, and stood where he was. He didn’t want to enter the house and face the horrors of his own mind. He wanted to delay that as long as possible, thank you very much. Like a docile shadow, Ginny obediently clung to him.

“Please, call me Porcia,” Miss Ramsey smiled, “I feel like a schoolgirl whenever anyone calls me Miss Ramsey.”

*You don’t look like a schoolgirl*, Ron thought immediately. She looked sweet and kind and many other pleasant synonyms, but the one thing she did not look was young. There were wrinkles and worry-lines on her forehead – a lot like those Mr. Potter had developed through his years of working as an Auror – and silvery-grey strands of hair brushed over her eyes. Ron knew she wasn’t *that* old, in her mid-to-late twenties actually, but she looked far older – there was a sad, knowing light in her placid eyes.



“Please, come in,” Porcia Ramsey invited them. “Or we could all sit on the swings, perhaps? Everyone’s inside – Zacharias, Mr. Smith, the team – but we’re still waiting for Susan and Madam Bones.”

“I want to go inside,” Ron said immediately. He thought he knew what was going to happen if he sat outside – Miss Ramsey and Sirius would begin the interrogation, feeding him sympathy and feel-better tips and pats-on-the-back. A boy could stand being sugarcoated for only so long before he collapsed.

Porcia looked down at him understandingly – a little too understandingly for his comfort – and led them up the steps to the front porch, and then into the house.

“Maybe your brother needs some time alone?” She suggested to Ginny as they all stood in the hallway. Ron was grateful to Miss Ramsey when Ginny reluctantly disentangled herself from him. Miss Ramsey pointed toward a door to the left and said, “Zacharias is there, alone. You might like sitting with him – we’ll send Susan to you two when she’s arrived, and then we’ll call you when everything is set up. Is that alright?”

Ron nodded and left, while Miss Ramsey took both Aunt Muriel and Ginny’s arms and steered them in the other direction. The room he entered was painted in cream-white with slashes of brilliant, electric-blue (of the Snape’s-pajamas-variety) here and there. Posters of handsome Quidditch players and Muggle stars – a few shirtless – decorated the wall. Most of them were ones that Rose idolized. Here and there was a framed picture of a somber witch or wizard, with a scroll below them listing their achievements in obscure fields of magic, contrasting oddly with the laughing, good-looking, young men in shiny posters next to them.

There was a large, glass bookcase in a corner of the room, a bed with an indigo-and-white coverlet and fluffy pillows next to it, and a large window with blue curtains and an inviting window-seat – ideal for reading away long, lazy summer afternoons. Zacharias was perched on the window-seat, arms wrapped protectively around himself, staring out of the window.

At Ron's entry, he half-turned his head and gave him a nod of acknowledgment. "This is her bedroom," he said, looking sulky, by way of invitation.

"She likes blue?" Ron suggested, sitting down next to Zacharias. Zacharias moved over to make room for him, pouting crossly.

"I don't *want* to be here," he said, trepidation in his large, dark eyes. "I'm not scared or anything," he said defensively, "But I just don't like this place. It gives me the creeps."

Ron nodded, understanding perfectly. The house was pretty, Miss Ramsey seemed nice, and the room was lovely – except for the choice in posters of course – but he knew that this was all just a façade. A sham: to make him feel better, to make him forget. The antonym of pressure tactics – relaxation techniques. Psychological torture, really, because he didn't *want* to relax. He wanted to scream, to yell, to cry – to hell with the fact that he was *twelve* – to break a windowpane, to hit something. He wanted to lose control, to forget who he was, to throw up, to run someplace far, far away. To do *anything* really, except just sit here in this pretty room and wait, wait, just wait.

"You look scared," Zacharias said suddenly, peering at him closely. Ron saw his own pale, wide-eyed face reflected in Zacharias' dark eyes. "I bet you're scared," Zacharias insisted, "I bet you're terrified. You are, aren't you? I know you are, don't try to deny it, you're shivering..." His voice was rising, higher and shriller, and his fingers were quivering.

When Ron'd been seven, a half-trained, young buck dragon had escaped from Gringotts' vaults. It had rampaged through London for a week – a mad week which had sent the Ministry of Magic into pandemonium – until it had finally been captured by the combined force of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, a shipment of dragonologists from the International Dragon Reserve in Romania, and a battalion of Aurors, led by James Potter –who'd proved his mettle that day and finally arrived on the scene of people to take notice of.

Uncle Padfoot had taken Rose, Neville, and Ron to the specially constructed, temporary enclosure where the dragon was being housed soon after the incident. Rose had performed a cartwheel there; she'd been so excited. Neville had taken a photograph of the dragon and based his first oil painting off it. And Ron had just stood, watching the chained Antipodean Opaleye roar and snort vivid, red flame, the sunlight glinting off its iridescent, pearly scales, feral terror in its glittering, multicolored, pupil-less eyes while the crowd around it cheered and laughed, shielded from it by barriers of magical protection.

Zacharias' eyes now, reminded him of that dragon. Ron was willing to bet that the other boy was even more frightened than he was. And bizarrely enough, he took comfort in that. He relished the sense of power it gave him over the other boy; Zacharias Smith, normally so dauntless and foul-mouthed who enjoyed needling Snape and the Slytherins – a bully in the making – now shaking like little Snidget Potter whenever Harry performed a somersault for her.

“Shut up,” Ron said calmly, without any particular inflection or emphasis on the words, dull, flat, and neutral. Surprisingly, it worked. A measure of relief at this blunt order stole into Zacharias' face, but he still wrung his hands together restlessly.

“Stop that,” Ron told him again. Zacharias' hands fell demurely into his lap, though he did clench them together until his knuckles turned white. He was sucking in air sharply through his teeth and swinging his legs so that they thumped into the wall with a sickening, dull *thwack*. Ron was reminded immediately of a guillotine, swinging down, severing a neck with brutal efficiency, a sickening, dull *thwack* and a life flowed away, sometimes silently, sometimes not, blood spurting, a severed head falling...

He was going to be sick.

Suddenly he wished he wasn't a boy, that he wasn't twelve years old. It would have been nice to hold someone's hand right now.

The minutes slipped away, the *thwack* of Zacharias' heels hitting the wood, and the tick-tock of an unseen clock persisted. 1, 1000, 2,

1000, 3, 1000, 4...he counted, feeling like he was running on borrowed time, like a prisoner about to be sent to his doom...

The door clicked open and a girl in a white blouse and forest-green skirt arrived. She stood hesitantly in the doorway, fingering her long, black plait before Ron nodded to her. She smiled shyly and crossed the room to perch daintily on the edge of the bed, looking at the two boys on the window seat. Zacharias ignored her and went on thumping on the wood with his legs. Ron had a feeling that Zacharias would start breaking things if he stopped.

"Ron and Zacharias, right?" The girl finally asked after an interminable pause Ron could not bring himself to break. "Hello, I'm um, Susan." She looked uncertain when neither of the boys spoke. Ron felt nauseous and Zacharias, doubtless, felt even more nauseous if the way he was acting was anything to go by.

"Are you, er, nervous?" she asked them. Ron thought that was a very stupid question to ask. Wasn't it evident they were both quaking in terror? And even if they weren't, was that the kind of question you posed to two twelve-year-old boys? What were they supposed to say – *oh yes, we go to the toilet in huge gangs to gossip, we bake cookies and have tea parties, we're sissies, love, we're in touch with our emotions, and we're not afraid to show that we too have real emotions – we cry and sob and get scared sometimes...* That was the kind of thing boys in Mrs. Potter's Muggle movies and Sirius' paperback romances did. That was how every teenage girl wanted her boyfriend to be like – well, maybe not the tea-party bit, but pretty close. And that was simply not something any self-respecting, young man *did* – unless, of course, he was completely round the bend.

Zacharias woke up from his trance with a start at Susan's question. He didn't look much like the Antipodean Opaleye now; he looked like an offended, alpha-male dog whose territory had just been crossed. "Why should I be?" he gasped, the image of insulted pride.

"Oh, I don't know," Susan said, backtracking at once. "I just thought..."

"I'm not scared of *anything*," he snapped, puffing out his chest, "If you I think I'm a..."

“Yes, yes, we know you’re in Gryffindor, cut the dramatics,” Ron said sharply. “Sorry,” he apologized to Susan, “He has a superiority complex, typical Gryffindor way to react to a situation of course, so...”

“It’s the best way to react,” Zacharias piped up. “I’m just glad I’m not a snotty Ravenclaw who always...” He glared at Ron, waiting for him to counter-attack with verbal insults.

Ron laughed. He couldn’t help it – it was just so *funny*, the whole situation really. Oh, poor Zacharias, the look on his face was to die for, and Susan, who couldn’t understand why he was laughing and who looked so concerned; it was just so incredibly hilarious...

The door and Sirius’ head popped in. “Come on,” he said, with an encouraging smile. Ron stopped laughing instantly. The pit of his stomach was churning and he knew, just knew he was going to start retching sooner or later, as he waddled across the room, his legs like jelly. Susan strode in front of him, her confidence belied by her trembling shoulders. At least she was keeping her act together better than Zacharias, who had now turned faintly green and was trailing behind Ron, looking like he would faint at any moment.

“Alright?” Sirius asked Zacharias, looking a little concerned for his health. Zacharias managed a faint squeak and, abandoning all pretenses, grabbed Ron’s elbow, allowing him to steer the two of them up the stairs. In front of them, Susan snorted at the absurd picture they made – Ron gripping the banisters and propelling himself forward, Zacharias clinging with both arms to the slighter boy’s elbow and dragging his feet up, very pale. By far, Susan was managing much better than either of them – at least she *looked* calm, if not collected.

*Girls are braver*, Ron thought, admiring her. *Rose, Ginny, Hermione, Padma even... they’d have all managed better than me.*

Sirius led them down the hallway, into a large room. It was so large that Ron suspected it had been magically enlarged. It was a crowded, cheerfully, noisy room with a bustling air about it. He recognized most of the people as Unspeakables, because they wore the uniform of the Department of Mysteries like Sirius – long, black robes, with an axiom in Greek embroidered in gold on the left. There were a few

representatives from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the Department of Obliviators, a few Healers in the St. Mungo's uniform – the presence of Healers struck him as ominous – and one from the Department of Records. They all looked very professional.

In the centre of the room were three chairs, placed neatly in a line. Sirius ushered them towards it. Susan took the seat on the right, lips pressed firmly together. Ron shook Zacharias off and took the seat in the centre. Zacharias collapsed into the last seat, on the left.

Miss Ramsey arrived, strangely incongruent in her Muggle, tulip-printed summer dress in this room full of wizards and witches in uniform. "Would you like your family members to be present?" she asked them quietly.

All three shook their heads. "I thought not," Miss Ramsey murmured. "Settle down, please!" she said sharply to the room. Like a classroom of noisy students, chided by their teacher, the buzz of conversation died down and everyone took their seats on the benches supplied around the room. There was a podium in front of Ron, Susan, and Zacharias and the wizard from the Department of Records stood in front of it, rustling his notes importantly.

"Miss Susan Amelia Bones, Mr. Zacharias Emery Smith, and Mr. Ronald Bilius Weasley?" he asked, peering good-naturedly down at them. All three nodded.

"June 16th, 1992, opening of the Weasley-Smith-Bones Case as arranged according to the suspected dates of the time of attack, not alphabetically listed," he read out from his notes. "Investigation of the evidence. First date. Supervised by Miss Porcia Sophia Ramsey, with help from..." he rambled on through a list of names and soon, the whole room was nodding in tune with him.

"Case opened," he said finally and bowed formally to the room. Ron suppressed a yawn while the adults clapped. He left the podium and Miss Ramsey took it. She didn't have any notes with her, Ron noted. She smiled warmly at the three of them.

"Please relax," she said soothingly, "You're sure you can take this up right now, correct?" She waited for all three of them to nod, before

continuing, "There's still time now, so please tell us if you need anything. No? Ready to face a grueling, three-hour-session, no breaks? Very well, then. We're going to take you up, one at a time, forty-five minute sessions. The last forty-five minutes, we'll work according to the notes we've jotted down. We're going to have to continue this for at least the next week, I'm afraid, unless the data we gather is pure and large enough for us to stop. This is the practicals we're facing now; the paperwork comes after this and then a long trial."

She looked at them, seriously, sharply. "I won't sugarcoat this for you," she said flatly, "This case is huge. You know what's involved; you know what's at stake – reputations, money, and the face of the Ministry. You are going to have your faces plastered on the Daily Prophet when this picks up – maybe on international papers too, if you're unlucky. You're going to be instant celebrities, or actually, notorieties. You'll be stared at, gasped at, run away from, harassed, and bullied. You might even face murder attempts, to seal up the living evidence, even though that's quite possibly the best way to give you all a fairer trial. If you die, *they* will lose. Unfortunately, you'll be dead."

Ron didn't know if she was trying to be funny. She certainly looked very serious.

"Do you understand?" she asked them, "You've signed the contract, but it's not binding yet. There's a second contract you must sign now – an Unbreakable Vow in printed word. Your guardians have already read it, and you can as well, right now before we begin. If you have any objections, you are free to leave."

A witch was walking towards them, a stack of documents in her arms. She placed a stack of papers – at least two inches thick – and a sharp, black quill in front of each of them. Ron's eyes zoomed through the document and he turned the seventy-nine pages restlessly, words like *indictment* and *Weasley* jumping up at him. He reached the last page and picked up the quill. Then he noticed there was no ink.

“It’s alright,” Miss Ramsey sighed, looking a little troubled. “There’s no need for ink. Brace yourself, it hurts.”

He signed his name *Ronald Bilius Weasley* and his signature, *R. Weasley* on the dotted line and gasped in pain. He turned over his hand and saw his name, bright red against the pale, pink skin before it faded away. The witch took away his quill and the document.

“First is Mr. Weasley. Second is Mr. Smith. Third is Miss Bones,” Miss Ramsey said clearly and coolly. She stepped away from the podium as a clutch of Unspeakables hovered over him, Healers and Obliviators hanging around Ron, Zacharias and Susan. The man from the Department of Records sat in a corner, already scribbling on a piece of parchment. Miss Ramsey said something to him and flicked her wand toward the three seats. She had performed a charm to give him a clearer view of the three. Then she walked over to them, the crowd parting in front of her to allow her to walk more easily.

They began arranging themselves into groups as well, the Healers standing around Susan’s chair, the Obliviators around Zacharias. Four Unspeakables – Sirius among them – and Miss Ramsey formed a pentagon around Ron, their wands in their hands now.

“You need to be conscious for this,” she explained to Ron softly. “I’m very sorry if I have to hurt you for this. This is very strong magic. Just, close your eyes now and think of that day. We’re giving you a minute – recollect that day. Don’t be scared, clear your mind of all emotion, and just focus on that day.”

Ron shut his eyes, concentrating as hard as he could. The seconds ticked by. A voice drifted to his ears, “We will begin in ten seconds. Brace yourself.”

He just had time to brace himself before the pain struck him – slashing directly through his head like a knife – steady, consistent, hard *pain*; leaving the rest of his body unscathed.

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Neville trudged from the inn to the beach, covering his yawns with a hand, his equipment packed into a bag. It was still dark, not yet four



o'clock. The beach was dark and deserted; there was a cool nip to the air. He was glad he had a coat on.

He set up his things by the light of a jar, filled with dancing, multicolored flames, his Gran had ordered him to take. When he had finished setting up his cameras – six feet away from each other – and selecting the proper modes, there was a faint, shell pink tinge illuminating the dark sky. He hovered between both cameras, wondering whether to choose the one for precision or the one for landscape. The wind ruffled his dark brown hair and the sea roared like a hungry animal. Gran didn't like the noise of the sea, but Neville did. He loved it, could feel its call tugging gently at him. He could hear its song, like no one else could.

Its mournful dirge was as enchanting to him as any classical opera (and he was fond of opera), the sweet call of the sirens beckoned to him over the rushing waves, an exquisite intoxicant that made him want to rush into the laughing, dancing surf. Sometimes, he wondered whether he would not simply lose his mind and obey the call.

The rim of the ocean was turning gold, and the sky was a study in contrasts, rosy hues blushing next to the starker, darker violets above them. He chose landscape and hovered in front of the camera, waiting for the opportune moment.

The sun was just emerging, exquisitely gold, the sky around it deliciously orange, slipping into pink here and there. The edge of the sea glittered invitingly, while the beach stood bleak and barren. Neville's camera clicked and a beautiful photo slipped out of the slot, into his palm. To him, the image glowed with life and vitality, even though it was just an ordinary – though very prettily captured – shot of the surf and sand at sunrise.

Neville sat down on the cold sand, watching the sunrise. One beautiful picture was enough. He didn't want any more. Only when the sun had risen to a respectable height did he slowly pack up his equipment, a contented smile on his face. Draco was wonderful at choosing gifts.

An owl hooted in the distance and rustling wings beat through the dawn air. A letter fell at his feet and he saw an owl swoop away. He picked up the envelope and slid it open. Four pages of parchment in Rose's characteristic, thick scrawl greeted him and he groaned aloud. Instantly, he felt ashamed of himself for groaning.

Sure, Rose wrote him reams of parchment almost every day. But, it ought to be his pleasure as her best friend to read them and to smile and to laugh and to sigh over them, *not* to glare at them day after day, wishing Rose wasn't his best friend and they would read themselves. He hadn't written to her once and half her letters had gone unread. He felt very guilty. He owed Rose so much. He was grateful to her for 'rescuing' him, of course, but yet, it seemed to him that his gratefulness was a burden, a duty. There were too many people grateful to Rose. Almost as many people as would like to disembowel her. She was the friendly, witty, charming-when-she-wanted-to-be Quidditch star with the stunning eyes. She was the daughter and goddaughter of two important men, always laughing or saying something funny or playing daredevil. Who didn't like her even if they swore they didn't?

Rose was more popular than she herself knew.

And it just wasn't fair. She didn't care about that. He was the Boy-Who-Lived and he was now rapidly fading into obscurity. He was the one who deserved popularity and he was the one who wasn't getting it. No, he wasn't sulking because his best friend was more interesting than him. It was just that... well, nothing. Something in their friendship had just snapped, flown away for good. The proverbial abyss... why had it happened? Why did he feel closer to Draco Malfoy whom he'd known a scant year – pouty, arrogant Draco whom he sometimes wanted to shake some sense into?

It depressed him, and he didn't want to be depressed. Too many things had depressed him this summer. He'd been glad when his Gran had suggested they spend the summer in a sheltered firth in Scotland, away from it all. He wanted to bury the old sorrows in peace.

**A/N: The poem at the beginning is from some website, I don't remember who wrote it so it's named Anonymous. I made some changes to the wordings, though. So, Year II begins – whew!**

**Let's give it up for my brilliant beta, Desiqtie! Thanks to everyone who applied, and Merry Christmas to all!**

## ***Fire on Fire***

*Some say the world will end in fire –*

*Some say in ice*

*From what I've tasted of desire,*

*I hold with those who favour fire.*

*But if it had to perish twice...*

*I think I know enough of hate*

*To say that for destruction, ice*

*Is also great*

*And would suffice.*

## **Robert Frost**

A small phantom in flame-red pajamas slipped out of Rose Potter's bedroom. It padded noiselessly down the dark upstairs' corridor of the Potters' house, past the bedroom papered in ice-blue where Harry snored peacefully, past the store-cupboard chock-full of odds and ends, and past James and Lily's cozy bedroom, before silently entering little Snidget's pink-and-yellow nursery. The specter lightly kissed the delicate, rosy forehead and cheeks of the baby in the bassinet, before advancing directly towards the window and throwing it open.

The balmy, midsummer's night air whistled in. It was as bright as day, and the full moon illuminated the pale, seemingly fragile face of the young girl at the window. It imparted a ghastly glow to the already pale countenance, causing the sharply cut features, particularly the square jawbone and strong nose, to stand out harshly. It lent an extra sparkle to the almond-shaped, luminous emerald eyes.

Rose leant against the windowsill, reveling in the beauty of the darkness. There was no doubt about it; Snidget had the best room in

the house. It was a pity she was too young to enjoy the view and the opportunities the strategically situated window afforded. Rose smiled slightly and placed her new diary and phoenix-feather quill on the windowsill. Then she swung up on it herself, bending a little to avoid hitting the upper ledge of the window.

There was a large oak tree right next to the window, its slimmer branches just grazing against the windowpane when the window was closed. Rose had been climbing it – to her mother's horror and her father and godfather's enthusiastic support – ever since she was four years old. She'd taught Harry, Neville, Ginny, and Ron how to climb a tree by having them practice on that tree before she was eight. She'd broken Neville's collarbone when, in a fit of temper, she had thrown him off it when they were both nine. She'd risked electrocution climbing it countless times in storms. She'd spent many hours of her life on it – reading, chatting, laughing, crying, dreaming, and swearing.

And she'd made a little ritual of climbing it on her birthday and staying on it for an hour, come hell or high-weather, every year since she'd turned five.

Climbing came to her as easily as flying, swimming, and beating almost everyone during a race. She slipped the diary into the waistband of her pajamas – it had no pockets – and caught the quill between her teeth. Then she grabbed onto the nearest branch and scampered up it as fast as she could. That was probably the trickiest part of it – sliding up the rough bark to safety and thicker branches (because the branches nearest to the window couldn't hold *anybody's* weight, except perhaps Snidget's), and not looking down. That was why Mum couldn't climb a tree or ride a broom to save her life – she was terrified of heights and she'd never learnt *not* to look down.

Rose settled down on a suitably thick branch, overlooking the garden. She swung her legs over so that they dangled in the air, nearly thirty feet from the ground. She looked down at the free-fall and felt her adrenaline spike. Exhilaration rose like a dizzying tingle in her soles. She loved the excitement and the thrill of it, so close to danger, close but controllable. It felt nearly half as good as playing a Quidditch match.

*Quidditch...* She couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts and play again, win again. That was why she'd brought the diary and the quill – already inked with the storable ink she'd gotten from Ginny as a birthday gift. She was going to use the diary as a Quidditch journal – to jot down famous Quidditch strategies, moves she might invent herself, statistics and pictures, and to commemorate her victories and triumphs. Someday when she became a famous Quidditch player (and of course she was going to be one), everyone would want this diary.

Rose chuckled lightly and put the diary on her lap. She fumbled for the quill – already pre-inked for three hours so that she didn't have to bring an extra inkbottle as well – and then flipped to the very first page of the diary. *Rose Iris Potter*, she wrote in her curliest, hardest-to-read calligraphy script. The leaves of the oak tree rustled gently in the warm breeze as she flipped to another page instantly.

*The Dead-Fish Roll*, she scrawled down, her letters sloppy and slanting to the right as usual. She was just about to begin writing its definition – she had a glossary of several hundred Quidditch moves, collected from various sources, known by heart – when a most surprising thing happened.

The letters on the page seemed to tremble and then faded into the creamy parchment, leaving it immaculate again. Rose gasped and almost tumbled out of the tree in amazement. She managed to upright herself by clinging onto a sturdy branch. By the time she'd regained her balance, a new set of words was floating up lazily on the parchment, written in the same scarlet ink as she'd written in. The words, the penmanship were not hers, however. The letters were smoother, longer, straighter, more elegant, somehow, easier on the eye and to read than her own script.

*Hello, Rose Iris Potter.*

The letters stood there for a moment, staring her boldly in the face, crimson against cream, before drifting back away, leaving pristine parchment again. Rose's heart hammered dully against her chest. She half-wanted to throw the diary out of the tree and run away, huddle comfortably, safely in her own bed. But the other half of her

knew that if she threw the diary away, she'd just go down and get it back again later. She grimaced, staring down at the parchment, unsure of what to do. She was dimly aware that the diary writing back to her – if that was it was doing – was *not* a good thing. In fact, it could be a very bad thing. Very bad as in might-prove-fatal, if the worst came to worst. Uncle Padfoot had filled her imagination with worst-case scenarios, with his nighttime tales of terror during her childhood.

As she peered down warily at the parchment, more words appeared. *It's a beautiful night, isn't it?*

She made her decision. It wouldn't hurt to write back, would it? She wasn't stupid, she was twelve years old, old enough to make her own decisions about what was right and what was wrong. *I'm an Auror's daughter. I can spot danger from a mile away. The only problem is that I like to follow it when I see it.*

Carefully, and in her neatest handwriting, she wrote, Yes. Monosyllables couldn't hurt.

The letters faded and new words rose quickly, almost eagerly to the surface. There was something uncanny about the speed with which her words disappeared and the new ones appeared, – something that raised goosebumps over her skin – even though it was a warm, beautiful night and the world was sweet with midsummer's fragrance and happy memories.

*It seems like summer. Is it?*

Rose's eyes narrowed. It felt so *wrong*. How was a silly diary – even if it was cleverly enchanted – supposed to know it was a beautiful night (or a night at all, really – diaries didn't have eyes)? How could the diary feel that it was summer? It wasn't a living thing! This was perfectly *ridiculous*.

So she did the only sensible thing she could. She flung the diary down, with all her might. From her spot in the tree, she could hear the hard thud it made, colliding with the ground, before it disappeared from view in the dark grass. Out of habit, she bit a strand of hair. Most people chewed their nails when they were worried; Rose bit her hair.

She sat in the tree for her designated hour, – swinging her legs, biting her hair, thinking – forcing herself to stay in place and to not jump after the diary.

When the hour was over, she hurriedly climbed down the tree, swinging nimbly from branch to branch and incurring scratches, she normally wouldn't have, in her haste. A piece of loose bark lodged in her fingernail and she yelped in pain, wrapping a wrist around the affected hand and sucking her thumb on instinct. She hung onto the tree with both legs only, wincing as she sucked blood from underneath the nail. Something icky rolled up her leg – a caterpillar – and on reflex she pulled back her leg from the tree.

She instantly lost balance and plopped seven feet to the ground, landing hard on her rear. She winced and scratched her leg, feeling aggravated. What right had the caterpillar to crawl up her leg? Didn't it know that it was a disgusting, horrendous, little creature and that it was high time for it to build a cocoon for itself? The skin under her fingernail itched, a spot of bright red blood dappling on her pale skin. She looked like a *vampire*. It wasn't fair that her skin never tanned and scarcely ever freckled – like Mum's – no matter the amount of time she spent outdoors in all weather. She hadn't asked to look like a mutant, rabid Vampire of Evil-Darkness.

*"You're a mutant, rabid Vampire of Evil-Darkness! I hate you!"*

That had been the first thing Neville had said to her after his recovery from a broken collarbone when they were both nine. Of course, it had been *her* fault that he'd broken his collarbone in the first place – and of course, she was sure it must hurt a lot – but she'd still punched him on the nose for calling her that (she'd never been able to stand name-calling when she was little, even though she'd indulged in her fair share of it to others). Neville hadn't spoken to her for a week. That was the longest they'd ever gone without speaking to each other and afterwards, they'd been best friends again.

*"Fire on fire. That's what you two are. That's why you get along so well together, that's why you hurt each other so much, why you love each other so much."*



Uncle Padfoot, in one of his rare moments of seriousness, had told her that. It was true, too. She knew Neville better than anyone else in the world, and he knew so much more about her – perhaps more than she knew about herself. He could get under her skin better than anyone else could and she could send him to torment with a few well-chosen words. Of course, they didn't needle each other so much nowadays – they'd fought like lions when they were both younger – and normally, Rose would have considered that a *good* thing.

Normally.

Maybe that was why she'd brought the diary to keep vigil with her on the night of her twelfth birthday. Not to record facts that she could recite at a moment's notice, not to record her achievements, but just something she could write in and then forget, to relieve herself. She couldn't keep her thoughts to herself, because in her mind she judged herself, nor could she confide them to anyone else – they were too deep for anyone but Neville.

And Neville was the problem.

Sighing, she fumbled in the grass for the diary. She was going to do this the proper way, the right way. Bury her thoughts in the graveyard of this beautiful, living diary and then burn it up. Goodbye. Adieu. Arrivederci.

So much the better, if the diary understood what she meant for it. She didn't care – she would burn it tomorrow, cry herself to sleep later, and then let anyone who wanted console her. They could comfort her all they wanted. She'd be glad for warm, pure, gushing affection tomorrow, she knew, unquestioning love and all that business. They wouldn't find out her secrets, not if she didn't want them to (and she *really* didn't want them to). Nobody knew all her secrets. Not even Neville.

Her fingers closed upon something plush and velvety and she picked up the diary. Rose settled down into a cross-legged position in a brighter spot of the garden – the moon was still high and glowing in the sky – and began to write. She suppressed a yawn by biting her tongue. The party had been a riot and the day had whirled by in a colorful hum of gifts, congratulations and fun. All of it had been

pleasantly exhausting – most of her birthdays usually were – and now, she would have been quite glad to snuggle up in bed and sleep till noon, her duties as brat, birthday girl, and vigil-keeper over. But she had to finish this one last task as well.

Write feelings. Be relieved. Burn diary. Cry in bed. Receive comfort. Be cheerful.

It was such a simple formula. She'd always used it – replacing the first variable with others such as 'Scream lungs out', 'Annoy Harry or Mum', and 'Run a mile' – and it had always worked for her. She was Princess Sunshine and Queen of Annoying Brats, wasn't she? She had a reputation to uphold, and that only worked when she applied her *modus operandi*. You couldn't be the Cherub of Joy if you were depressed.

*July 31/August 1 (?) 1992*

*My best friend is avoiding me.*

*He writes to me about once every week. I write to him almost everyday. He doesn't answer most of my letters. I get the feeling that he doesn't even read most of my letters. Even when he does write to me, his letters are short and vague. He does send me a lot of photographs though. Stupid pictures he takes with the camera Draco sent him.*

*He didn't come to my twelfth birthday party. This is the first time he hasn't been to my birthday party ever since I turned six.*

*He only sent me my present today, without a letter. Just a card he made out of a picture he took with 'Happy Birthday Rose!' written on the back. Nothing else.*

*He's writing to other people more than he is to me. Ron and Draco, Harry and Ginny aren't complaining about the shortage of letters (not that he ever really writes to Harry and Ginny, just little notes and pictures).*

*We haven't discussed the Philosopher's Stone or the mayhem at the end of last year. At first I didn't want to talk about it. I wanted to leave it alone, just like he did.*

*Now I do. Now I really, really do. I want to talk about it, analyze it, ask him questions, and hear what he has to say about it. He still doesn't, I know, I can read between the lines of his notes.*

*His handwriting in his letters to me has changed. Not his handwriting in the letters he sends to Ron – I've compared them. They're neater now, there's more space between the words and lines, and there are no scribbles or funny cartoons in the margins either. He writes with pencil first in the letters, and then writes over the pencil marks in ink.*

*He's more careful with his words too, more... neutral. Less... passionate, if you can say that about a letter. It's like he spends more time writing those short letters, like he's being careful about what he says to me, like he doesn't trust me or something.*

*That hurts. That hurts a lot. And that's why I'm very sad.*

*I have more things to be sad about too, but this... rift (?) with Neville is the worst of it. Ron's going through a lot of pressure this summer. He doesn't tell me about what they do to him during the Case Sessions. The only things I know, I pick up from Ginny.*

*Ginny says she can hear them screaming upstairs, on her way to the bathroom in Miss Ramsey's house. Miss Ramsey makes her, Mrs. Prewett, Madam Bones, and Mr. Smith sit in the downstairs living room with cake, lemonade, and magazines and that room is soundproofed. The toilet isn't sound insulated, though, and Ginny spends a lot of time there, listening because she can't drag herself away. I think she cries there too.*

*She says the one screaming loudest is a boy who's not Ron – Smith, I guess – and then she can hear a girl shrieking sometimes – Susan Bones. Ron screams the least frequently but when he does, Ginny says it comes out like a werewolf's howl during the Full Moon.*

*I want to know what happens to Ron – I ask him enough – but then, I don't too. I don't want to have that... burden on me, of knowing how*

*horrible it is, and knowing that I can't do anything about it, that I'm weak and helpless. I hate feeling weak and helpless. Is that bad of me? Not wanting to know the truth because I know I can't handle it?*

*I think I'm a coward and that hurts too. My parents, Uncle Padfoot, Uncle Moony, Ron – they're all so brave. Except for Ron who's brilliant and in Ravenclaw, they're all in Gryffindor. I got Sorted into Slytherin. At first I – everyone in fact – was really surprised, but I'm not, now. My year-mates in Slytherin are all my friends – except for Pansy and Theodore Nott – but I still know they're all kind-of cowards. Except for Tracey and Neville maybe, they'd all save their own skin first.*

*And inside, I'm a horrible person too. The Mirror of Erised told me that. I saw myself killing someone, someone I know very well. The funny thing is, I have no idea why I would want to kill that person. Sometimes I do tell him "I going to kill you!" but that's only in fun, never seriously. I'm an almost-murderess. Eck. How is that supposed to improve my mood?*

*Nobody knows how miserable I feel, how nasty I am. Nobody even suspects. Of course I don't want them to find out, but it'd be nicer if it did sort-of, accidentally, kind-of come out. They'd all hate me, but at least then the truth would come out. Not that I'm a sucker for the truth – I like lying and sometimes I do it even when I don't have to – but, well, it would be a relief, wouldn't it? I'm not making any sense right now, but it's past midnight now and I'm tired and blue, my back hurts, the back of my throat is dry, and I look like a mutant vampire. How would you feel under such conditions?*

*I'm sure you're thanking your stars right now that you aren't the lovely (yeah right, make my day and say that) **Rose Iris Potter (R.I.P** in case you didn't notice the irony). But the last laugh, as usual, shall be mine. I'm going to burn you up tomorrow, spend the rest of the day sulking in bed, and then wake up bright and cheery on the 2nd of August.*

*Goodbye, pretty diary.*

Rose snapped the book shut firmly, climbed up the tree with it tucked under her arm, and let herself into the house through Snidget's

window. She already felt much better. Having the last laugh with a talking diary was always fun.

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“Rose, is this yours?” Harry stood in the doorway of Rose’s bedroom, waving the dark green, velvety diary he’d discovered in the fireplace, when the flames went out. A bit charred around the edges and warm to the touch, but still in surprisingly good condition. Perhaps it was a fire-resistant diary? He watched his older sister sip a mug of hot chocolate. She’d spent nearly the whole day sulking in bed, despite the best efforts of the entire family to cheer her up.

Rose put down her mug and scowled at him. “What is that?”

“Isn’t it one of your birthday presents?” he asked, examining the diary more carefully. He stepped into her room. “Sure looks familiar.” He tossed it onto her bed.

Rose picked up the diary and turned it over, sliding open a page. Her lips were pressed tightly together and her eyes were narrowing dangerously. “Where did you find it?”

Harry explained and added, “I suppose it’s fire-resistant. Sometimes they add those charms to things.”

“To *diaries*?” Rose demanded, looking up in disgust. “Maybe to pans and wills, but why on personal diaries? That’s a stupid idea.”

“Maybe the person who sent you that knew you’d do your best to destroy it?” Harry suggested. Rose threw a pillow at his head, striking him on the side of his head.

“You’re a brat,” she snapped, getting up from the bed. “Why can’t you leave things that don’t belong to you *alone*?” She looked furious as she strode to her wardrobe. “Little toe-rag!” she growled, fumbling in her closet and bringing out a pair of jeans and a shirt. She was still in her pajamas now.

“Get out now,” Rose ordered him, “I’m going to change.”

"Where are you going?" Harry asked interestedly. Rose had been suspiciously inactive that day.

"To Baker's Eddy," she said haughtily, naming the large pond at the edge of the village. "I'm going to drown this damn thing."

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*Flashes of red hair, high in the sky. Laughter ringing like wedding-bells. The warmth of the midsummer sun beating down pleasantly. A checkered white-and-red blanket spread on the yellowing grass. A woman's voice, singing an old, half-forgotten tune.*

*"Oh come and stir my cauldron,*

*And if you do it right,*

*I'll boil you some hot, strong love*

*To keep you warm tonight*

*A cauldron full of hot, strong love..."*

"Ron, can I ask you a question?"

Ron stirred groggily, batting at his eyes. Two wide dark green eyes peered down at him. "Lo, Rose," he managed, half-yawning, "The party isn't till four." It was Ginny's birthday, the 11th of August.

"What kind of a friend would I be if I didn't arrive early?" she smiled, bouncing a little on his bed.

"You didn't have to arrive *this* early," he groaned, pulling himself up to lean against the headboard of his bed. Pale sunlight filtered into the bedroom, casting a sickly light on the mildewed wallpaper, the frayed carpet and the numerous bookcases and shelves, crammed beyond capacity with tomes of all shapes and sizes. This had once been Fabian Prewett's bedroom. Now it was his nephew's. "What time is it?" Ron asked, staring out at the starred, watered-lemonade patch of sky he could see from the window.

“About half past four, I think,” Rose said, grinning broadly. “What’s the matter – aren’t you glad to see me?”

“Delighted enough to crack your ribcage,” Ron yawned, falling back on his bed again. “Be a good little girl and wake up Ginny.”

“Sweet Ginevra needs her beauty sleep,” Rose drawled. “If I woke her up now, she really *would* crack my ribcage. She’s stronger than you.”

“So I’m weaker than my ten-year-old baby sister. Thanks for telling me that,” Ron snorted. He closed his eyes and mumbled, “I was having such a good dream too, about my family...” In truth he’d already forgotten his dream.

Rose switched to Motherly-Mode instantaneously. “About what?” she cooed, sounding concerned. Rose always managed to sound concerned when the subject swerved to his family. Concerned and scared that he’d burst into tears or scream at her. She needn’t have worried though – Ron was hardly an emotional live-wire. That was Zacharias’ forte.

“Fooled you,” Ron laughed. He opened one eye just in time to see Rose pout indignantly. “Why’d you come so early?”

“Cause I’m quirky,” Rose laughed, flopping down next to him. They lay side by side, staring at the dust that had gathered in the elaborately carved nooks of the bed’s footboard. The Prewett homestead had once been of fabled grandeur, on a par with anything the Blacks could scare up. Now the house was in its last stage of decadence. Fading Beauty in the works.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked again, after some time.

“Fire away,” Ron yawned. “Not like I’m ever going to catch up on my beauty sleep with you around...”

Rose laughed. After a pause she said, “Have you ever heard of an object that *won’t* be destroyed, no matter what you do to? Throw it into the fire, it’ll just be warm after the fire goes out. Pitch it into a lake and it’ll float back to the surface in a few minutes. Try to slice it with a

knife and it won't even tear a little bit. Drop a bottle of ink on it and the ink siphons off after some time. Stomp on it and nothing happens. The spine holds even when you try to rip it apart with your bare hands, no matter how much force you apply. Hand it to Snidget and it's still fine and dandy after she's finished playing with it. *Bite* it and the marks don't appear on it. Swear at it and hope it disintegrates, it's still there. Apply all the spells you know on it, nothing works."

Ron's eyes had sprung open in astonishment by now. "What is it?" he demanded sharply.

"Diary, I got as a birthday gift," she said carefully, "Though I'm not telling you who gave it to me."

Ron pondered over the conundrum for a few silent moments. Eventually, Rose poked sharply in his ribs and expectantly asked, "Well? Have you fallen asleep again?"

"...Maybe it has enchantments on it that prevent it from being destroyed with simple methods?" Ron suggested, massaging his ribs. "It's not like swearing at something is going to do anything. But the lake thing... it floats back to the surface? Maybe it has buoyancy charms, but why would a diary have them? Maybe impermeability spells too – you couldn't tear it apart with your hands either. And..." He began counting the spells that might have been placed on the diary and finally finished, looking troubled. "But why would a diary have all those on it? Unless..."

He looked very thoughtful now. "What did Anthony Goldstein give you for your birthday?" he asked suddenly.

"A huge pack of Bertie Botts' Every-Flavor Beans and a nice card," Rose said, bewildered. "At least I think so. Why?"

"Bertie, eh?" Ron was grinning wickedly now. "They're your favorites."

"And your point is...?"

"Oh nothing, nothing at all," Ron smiled sweetly and angelically. Rose half-expected a halo to form over his head. "Don't tickle me, please," he added, "I'm sure you'll find out about Anthony plenty soon..."



maybe sooner than soon if you're *really* unlucky or if Zacharias is in a bad mood..."

"What does Smith have to do with all this?" Rose demanded, exasperatedly.

"He's a gossipmonger with plenty of information to dispense," Ron said simply. "Beneath that nasty I'm-a-Prick exterior lies a truly feminine love of tittle-tattle..."

"I'm a girl and I don't gossip!" Rose protested indignantly.

"You're an anomaly," Ron stated.

"I *like* being a tomboy," Rose snapped defensively. "And stop changing the subject – do you think I'll ever be able to destroy the diary?"

"You shouldn't even try," Ron said flatly, "It sounds really expensive."

"Probably is," Rose said, thinking about the Malfoy fortunes. "So, it's normal, right? Not dangerous?" She sounded eager to have her question answered.

"Why would it be dangerous?" Ron laughed. "Diaries aren't dangerous, unless they're two-way diaries of course and the person who has the other diary can read what you're writing. But because Anthony didn't give it to you, I can safely conclude that you are in no danger whatsoever of having your private thoughts tapped. Go to sleep and don't wake me up till noon."

"Aye, aye Cap'n," Rose chuckled.

**A/N: Happy 2008 everyone, good luck for the new year to all of you!**

## ***Revelation***

*Behind the veil, forbidden,*

*Shut up from sight,*

*Love, is there sorrow hidden,*

*Is there delight?*

*Is joy thy dower or grief,*

*White rose of weary leaf,*

*Late rose whose life is brief, whose loves are light?*

## **Before the Mirror, Algernon Swinburne**

“By official decree from the Minister of Magic, Bartemius Crouch, you, Madame Bellatrix Black Lestrangle, are under house-arrest for the next eleven months, August 19th, 1992 to July 19th, 1993, in accordance with recently discovered evidence...” the voice of the administrator from the Department of Records droned on – stating the terms and conditions of her imprisonment, her rights for the duration, and why she had been placed under house-arrest. The file contained ninety-five pages, jam-packed with highly detailed information.

Rodolphus Lestrangle leant forward in his armchair, listening intently. He appeared oblivious to the battalion of Aurors and officials from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in his drawing room. His wife sat, enthroned like a queen, in the armchair next to his, coolly combing out her long, black hair, and occasionally taking a dainty sip from a jewel-encrusted teacup. A cold sneer played across her lips, but otherwise, she appeared as serenely composed as her husband.

Bellatrix's eyes wandered over the occupants of the room, pausing for short moments on some, meeting their eyes, intimidation in her gaze. Everyone looked away after a few seconds; none of them bold enough to face her steely, blue eyes for long. A creamy, satisfied smile replaced the cold sneer now – *My reputation precedes me, yet.* Her heavily lidded eyes settled on the young man standing in front of

all the other Aurors, ease and control evident in every lineament of his thin, angular face and lean figure.

*Look at me*, she willed him; *Let me see the fear in your eyes, boy*. After a few moments, the man became aware of her keen gaze. He turned slightly towards her, his hazel eyes locking with her stormy ones. He held her gaze, his repugnance obvious. The moments slipped by and Bellatrix's eyes began to water. The man's eyes glittered moistly in the lamplight.

*So you want to play, do you? Don't worry, Potter, we'll have our game soon enough. On my terms*. She closed her eyes lazily, droplets seeping from the corners, and offered him the ghost of a smirk.

"Madame Lestrangle."

"Yes?" she drawled, putting her silver comb down on the table. She smiled sweetly at the official from the Department of Records and, playing the perfect hostess, asked, "Anything you require? Tea? Coffee?" *Mother would have been so proud of me*. He barely repressed a shudder and shook his head.

"Bella," Rodolphus said quietly, touching her hand lightly. "It's time for us to rise." He stood up and held out his hand towards her expectantly.

She looked at his hand, at his fat, lily-white fingers, glittering with jewels, for a moment. Then suddenly, she swept out of her armchair, her stiff, crimson silk gown rustling. She threw back her head, her long hair whipping with a rush over her shoulders and splaying down her back – a frothing dark waterfall – and let out a low, clear, ringing laugh. Some people cringed; others drew out their wands with frightened looks on their faces. Even Rodolphus drew a little back, fumbling for his own wand.

Only James Potter advanced, wandless. "Madame Lestrangle," he said curtly, looking up at her, "Kindly refrain from such frivolous, time-consuming antics and behave yourself."

*You're not afraid, yet, are you? Good for you. We'll change that, soon though, quite soon*. "James Potter, isn't it?" she drawled, resting her

hands on her wide hips and leaning forward to laugh tantalizingly into his face. "You have a little girl don't you – Rose, isn't it? My dear nephew, Draco Malfoy, is in her year and he's told me so *much* about her. Such a sweet, pretty, innocent child... you really ought to be careful about her..." She pouted at him and whispered, "Children, little girls especially, get hurt so easily."

Potter's eyes narrowed coldly. Bellatrix could almost feel the rage – and the fear – radiating off him in waves. *Easiest way to strike at a man – strike at his precious brats*. He didn't rise to her bait, but his voice was even more clipped, as he said, "Madame Lestrage, have you understood the terms and conditions?"

"Oh I have, I have," Bellatrix assured him, still smiling, "But I must warn you, my good man, that you ought to take better care of your daughter... or else."

**000**

"... A complete nightmare, and that woman had the gall, she had the actual *gall*, to say..." Daddy spluttered incoherently, sounding furious.

"Empty threats," Uncle Moony said calmly, reassuringly. "With the protection your group has assigned... well, it's like Azkaban without the Dementors."

There was the sound of a mug slamming into a table violently and a growl of rage from Daddy.

"Easy, Prongs, old man," Uncle Padfoot drawled, "You don't have the worst of it. *We're* the ones faced with the real evidence, the facts. Did I tell you, yet, about what she actually did to those children?"

"You can tell us after Rose has had her say," Uncle Moony said, "She's been hiding behind the door for the last ten minutes."

"Eight," Rose scowled, emerging from behind the door, clutching the diary. "And why can't I hear what happened to Ron?" There was a mutinous expression on her face. "And don't tell me I'm too young to know. If Ron went through it when he was six, why can't I hear about it now that I'm twelve?"

“Did *he* tell you about it?” Uncle Padfoot asked. Rose glowered at him. “So there,” he said brightly, sipping from his mug of coffee, “You get to hear about it when Ron tells you. He’s your friend, I’m sure he’ll tell you when he’s ready.”

“Wild horses won’t drag that story out him,” Rose grumbled, “And I’m not just going to go up to him and say, ‘Hellooooooooooooo Ronnikins, feel like telling me about the day almost your whole family got brutally murdered?’” She flopped down on the sofa next to her father – swinging her feet and glaring at her godfather. “Spill the beans.”

“No,” Uncle Padfoot said flatly, his eyes as hard and unyielding as stone.

“Yes,” growled Rose. *I have the right to know. I have the right to know even more than you do.* She was furious with Uncle Padfoot, who’d steadfastly refused to tell her ever since the day the Case Examinations had officially ended. She’d wheedled and cajoled, coaxed and bothered, cried and yelled, bribed and begged until she was blue in the face, but the ultimate answer was always a firm “No”. She was getting a little desperate now.

“Yes,” Uncle Moony said calmly, staring down Uncle Padfoot. “I think she deserves to know. What do you think, James?”

“I do,” Rose insisted, looking at her father. “I so do. Don’t you think so? I think so. In fact, I’m sure. Don’t I deserve it?”

Daddy held up a hand to silence her. “Of course you do,” he said gently, putting an arm around her shoulder and looking down at her tiredly from under his glasses. “If anyone does, you do. But do you want to know?”

*No, not really. I’m a coward, remember? Oh wait, you’re Daddy and you think I’m perfect.* “Of course I do,” she insisted, praying that he’d say something along the lines of “Oh no, you’re too young now – maybe later...?” She could deal with that; she could deal very comfortably with that.

“She’s too young,” Uncle Padfoot said flatly, scowling disapprovingly at her for perhaps, the fifth time in her life. “Only twelve years old, do

you think she's old enough to handle it? It's not a pleasant story, James."

"I think we all know that," Uncle Moony said quietly. "She might only be twelve, Sirius, but she's seen more than most twelve-year-olds hasn't she?" His eyes softened as they surveyed her. "I think we all know about what happened in June."

Rose's stomach performed an odd back flip. This was the closest that anyone had come to mentioning the Philosopher's Stone and the events leading up to Quirrell's attempt to steal it. *I saw You-Know-Who. My best friend almost killed me. I'm old enough.*

"She should know," Daddy said, "If you won't tell it to her, Padfoot, I will." There was a note of finality, steely firmness, in his voice as he cuddled Rose.

Uncle Padfoot muttered something about twelve being a ridiculously young age to be told about this, cleared his throat, grunted, and glared wrathfully at Rose. She almost stuck out her tongue at him.

"The Easter Vacations, 1996," Uncle Padfoot began, voice flat, "The Weasleys' house. A normal day – daughter four-year-old Ginevra Weasley sent to play for the morning at the Lovegoods' house nearby. Arthur Weasley at home; most likely working in the garden with his sons, Frederick and George, eight, and Charles, thirteen. Wife Molly and son, Percival, ten, most likely in the kitchen. William, fifteen, and Ronald, six, playing chess in the den. Sounds of a scuffle outside – Ron and William rush into the kitchen. The door outside to the lawn is open. Bill sees something and whispers to Ron to hide, pushes him wildly under a table.

Ron hears screams and laughter outside, but huddles under the table, scared. Most likely a *Muffliato* was cast over the entire house. No chance of Muggles interfering; the house being set high on a hill, visibility also reduced effectively by foliage. Ron peeks from underneath the legs of the table and after some time, sees a black robe swishing and a woman laughing. Then more shoes and finally, a body being dragged inside – a young boy's body. Someone casts a *Homenum Revelio* and Ron is discovered.

He is dragged out – by the hair – by a woman whose mask has slipped off, identified as Bellatrix Lestrange. He sees the bodies of his family members laid out on the kitchen floor, Mr and Mrs Weasley, William, Charles, Percival, George and Frederick. The word “Blood Traitor” is slashed through their bodies – the ‘Bl’ on Arthur’s forehead, ‘oo’ through the lower half of Molly’s face, ‘d’ on William’s neck, ‘Tr’ on the upper portion of Charles’s chest, ‘ai’ on Percival’s stomach, ‘t’ through George’s intestines, and ‘or’ over Frederick’s legs. Deep wounds, bleeding profusely. Apparently, the wounds were inflicted while the victims were still alive. There are more wounds, as well, leading to the conclusion that they were not murdered by *Avada Kedavra*, but died out of a variety of factors – internal bleeding, skull concussion, trauma to the nervous system – owing to several curses.

The other ones in the room, now almost all of them mask-less, are identified as Bartemius Crouch Junior, Alecko and Amicus Carrow, John Travers, Leofric Rosier, and Erasmus Yaxley. In addition, there are four other men. They are later identified, when their masks are removed at the Bones’ and Smiths’ houses as Albert Runcorn, Walden MacNair and Tristan Rosier.

Ron screams and bites Lestrange. She yells in pain and drops him. Travers shoots a *Petrificus Totalus* at him. He falls and is subjected to the Cruciatus Curse for at least five minutes – inflicted by Lestrange, Amicus Carrow, and Yaxley successively. The others watch the fun and jeer at him. The bodies of his family members are constantly in front of him.

Then, Lestrange uses *Sectumsempra* to cut a replica of the Dark Mark on his forehead. It cuts at least an inch into his skin – plenty of blood. Then the memories we have extracted go blank – she must have Obliviated him then – and when Ron wakes up, it is twilight, the Petrificus Totalus has worn itself out, and he sees the corpses laid out in a line in front of him. He begins to scream and runs out of the house.”

Uncle Padfoot finished and rubbed his eyes wearily. “Similar treatment was meted out to Susan and Zacharias. Edgar and Eleanor Bones and their two-year-old son, Edmond, as well as Nehemiah and Saoirse Smith were murdered. In all, there were twelve casualties.”

Silence flooded the room. Rose suddenly realized that her knuckles were bleeding – she'd been digging her nails so hard into them that the skin had torn. Tears leaked out of the corners of her eyelids. Uncle Moony's eyes were shut, moist at the corners, and Daddy's lip was bleeding.

"It wasn't pleasant getting those memories out," Uncle Padfoot said quietly. "Ron, Susan, and Zacharias are going to have those memories forever now. We suggested that they have those memories Obliviated again, but they didn't want to do that either. We already have permanent, tamper-proof records of the memories stored at the Department of Records as well as at top-security vaults at Gringotts. The Trial Sessions are going to begin by mid-October, once all the evidence has been reviewed by an official committee and the defense prepares her council."

Nobody said anything. It was beyond words now.

"I think I'll go up to bed now," Rose whispered, getting up. "G-goodnight." She was about to go away when Daddy said, "I think you forgot something." He handed her the diary she'd been meaning to hand over to him – to check if it was safe or not. Now she didn't care anymore. Numbly she took it and strode upstairs. The upper floor was dark – Mum was spending the evening with Aunt Mary and Harry was at Liam Turner's birthday party. She stepped into her room and collapsed onto her bed, crying herself softly to sleep.

It was very late when she woke up again. A covered platter of cookies and a cup of milk had been placed on her bedside-table. She yawned, stretched, and climbed out of bed to shut the door and to light the room. She grabbed a cookie and began to munch it, while she searched her desk for a quill and ink. When she finally found them, she sat down on her bed again, checked the Kneazle-shaped clock on the headboard, and picked up the diary. She flipped to the second page and began to write,

*August 20, 1992*

*Today has been the most...*



**A/N: To SRFan!/: Welcome back! Lol, interesting comparison between the trio and the Marauders' gang! I'm glad you like Ron here, he's different from in canon I used to think that nobody would like him. Neville's attitude, however in general, is not that of a snotty, pig-headed jerk. Outwardly, he's the same kid he used to be, maybe a little quieter and less social than before because of his ordeal at the end of first year, so Augusta doesn't think he's any different. And Rose isn't telling anyone how cool he's being towards her, either. So, all seems fine and dandy. Thanks for the compliment about the banner – it was my first work ever!**

## ***Angels and Demons***

*How much does a man live, after all?*

*Does he live a thousand days, or one only?*

*For a week, or for several centuries?*

*How long does a man spend dying?*

*What does it mean to say “for ever”?*

## **Pablo Neruda**

*Pouting red lips. A Grecian nose. High cheekbones, sculpted features. Heavy lids veiling large, dark eyes, colder than winter, immeasurable, lightless, icy caverns. Glossy black hair framing a beautiful face. Laughter ringing like silver bells, an exquisite violin sonata. The face blurred – morphing and shifting within its frame of long, dark hair. Now it was not a woman’s, it was a child’s. Square jawbones now. A pointed chin, a mulish set to the prettily pouting, pink lips. Long lashes sweeping over brilliant emerald eyes – luminous with their own fire. A child’s voice whispering the woman’s words, “Such a sweet, pretty, innocent child... you really ought to be careful about her...”*

James Potter bolted upright, mouth opening into a soundless scream. He was bathed in sweat and trembling. Beside him, Lily grunted softly in her sleep and shifted into the warm hollow of the bed, which his body had occupied moments before. One of her warm arms wove into his lap and he woke to reality with a hard jolt. The room was dark; the only source of illumination, the ghastly-bright moonlight spilling onto the floor. The hour was probably between midnight and three o’clock.

James leant against the headboard, licking his numb lips. Gradually the trembling subsided, the sweat dried off. *I’m working too hard*, he thought, remembering the dream and almost shuddering in revulsion. *Note to self: lay off the work a little, take a long vacation, the Ministry can survive a couple of days without me, of course they can. Stress, overwork, that’s the cause of all these... nightmares.*

He shivered slightly. He'd been plagued throughout his life by frequent nightmares – more than most people experienced – but now, a grown man of thirty-two, he had it pretty much under control. *Had*. The past week had been... hectic at best. Not a surprise, considering that he was in charge of all the protection being laid around the Lestranges' homestead castle – logging up an enormous, ancient fortress for house arrest under Level A conditions was no easy business – but really, this was getting *ridiculous*. He'd been having nightmares – he hated using that term, it was just so childish – for the last seven nights, straight in a row.

Horrible nightmares too; each of them more vivid, grotesque, and imaginative than the last. The faces of friends and enemies dead long ago, emerging from the grave, one night. Psychopaths he'd helped to track down and capture, turned loose on the streets from their cells in Azkaban, wreaking havoc on the innocent. Those he loved being killed in increasingly nauseating ways. Those he would die for, betraying him and watching on calmly as he was slaughtered.

And tonight... Bellatrix Lestrangle's face changing into his precious little Rosalie's face, Lestrangle's words in Rose's voice. Was it an omen? A sign of times to come?

No, the sensible, rational part of his mind – the part that hadn't been terrified when Lestrangle had made her threats against his daughter – told him. *Rosalie isn't Lestrangle. She's just my little Rose*. A feeling of fierce protectiveness and love, deep, pure love – for Lily lying next to him, for Rose sleeping peacefully two rooms down the corridor, for Harry snoring away in his bedroom papered in ice-blue wallpaper, for Snidget sucking her thumb in her sleep and smiling, for his three children blissfully unaware of the world and its horrors, still naïve, still innocent – engulfed him.

*Maybe not innocent*, he thought wryly, thinking of Rose and Sirius poring over thick biology books together when Rose was nine. *And maybe not naïve, either*, he thought sadly, thinking about what she had faced in June. He slipped out of bed and pattered silently down the dark corridor, to the room at the end. If the moonlight was bright in their room, it was brilliant here. The room practically glowed, bathed in heavenly light. Posters of handsome men – most of them

Quidditch players, but a few of band-singers and Muggle actors too – stood out starkly on the walls, now gleaming a dull, earthy red in the moonlight.

Rose slept sprawled out on her bed, all long, ungainly limbs, untidy hair falling on her face. Still a little girl.

James smiled and sat down on the edge of the bed, tugging her hair gently off her face. She looked like a little angel to him, with her radiant smile – Lily's smile – and sweet, dear face – his face. Twelve years old already, *his* little girl. It was astounding.

He remembered holding her in his arms before she was an hour old, marveling at how delicate, how tiny, how perfect she was. He remembered her toddling around the house, cooing her first word "Dada", and beaming at the world through her beautiful eyes. Their precious little miracle in wartime. The war passed and he remembered her growing up through the peace that never seemed to end (which he hoped would never end, even though he knew that it would, someday); willful, obstinate, charming the living daylights out of everyone she met when she was in a good mood and infuriating them when she wasn't, reckless, manipulative, a tropical bird of paradise – all flame and color and jeweled plumage.

And here she was, half-grown, already. The years would pass and he knew, almost exactly, how they would pass. She was beautiful to him now. In years to come, she would be beautiful to everyone – hormonal, teenage boys included – more cunning, less reckless, but fiercer, prouder, even more fascinating. She'd grown from a child to a young girl and one day she would be an adult, a young woman. The thought scared him.

*I wish you could be little forever*, he thought, looking down at her, smiling sweetly in her sleep. *Why can't you, Rosalie? The world will hurt you one day; it always does, to everyone. And I... I won't be there to protect you, to look out for you. You'll face the world like you always do, you might not laugh in its face like I used to, but you'll bring it to your knees in your own way. You'll be fine, but you won't be my little girl, anymore. You'll be someone else's lover, maybe even someone else's mother; you won't always be my baby.*

“That’s the way the world works, James,” a quiet voice behind him said, startling him. He turned around and saw Lily next to him, a bittersweet expression on her face. “Don’t worry about her – she’s going to be alright.”

“You think so?” he almost whimpered, a plea in his voice.

“Yes,” Lily whispered, kneeling down next to the bed and stroking Rose’s forehead gently. “I know so.”

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“Baby, where have you been all my life?” Blaise Zabini drawled, throwing an arm over Rose’s shoulders. She laughed and threw off his arm, inspecting him carefully.

“You’ve grown,” she informed him brightly, “Pretty soon, you might even be my height.”

“You’re a giant,” Blaise retorted, “You can’t expect me to be as tall as you. It’d spoil my good looks. Plus I’d have to bend in two to snog the girls.”

“Not like all the girls are queuing up to snog you,” Rose chuckled. She turned towards her parents, “Mum, Daddy, this is Blaise – I think you remember him from my party?”

“Charmed,” Daddy said, nodding at Blaise. “Let’s get your trunk in, Rose...”

“You’re sitting with us,” Blaise informed her. “All of us are going to sit together.” His lips curled into an unpleasant smirk, “Even darling Malfoy.”

“Hellooooooooooo, Maria,” Uncle Padfoot winked at a pretty, dark-haired, seventh-year girl who was making eyes at him. “Why, of course, I remember you from last year...”

“Pedophile,” Uncle Moony called out, “Honestly, Sirius, at *your* age?”

“I’m at a nice manly age, I’ll have you know!” Sirius said indignantly, “Only thirty-two, while the charming Miss Maria is er... seventeen...”

“Cradle-robber,” Mum sighed, shaking her head. “Kiss your big sister bye-bye, Snidget.”

“Isn’t it a pretty, big, red choo-choo?” Harry cooed to Snidget, as the baby placed a slobbery, little kiss on Rose’s nose. “Don’t you just love it, Snidget? Someday you’re going to ride it too!”

“Bye Mum, Daddy, Uncle Padfoot,” Rose said, kissing her parents and hugging her godfather. “Try to stay out of trouble till I get back, squirt,” she told Harry, crushing him into a hug. “Take care, Snidgy, and don’t forget me,” she kissed her little sister’s forehead and cheeks gently. Daddy heaved her trunk and Uncle Moony pulled his own trunk onto the train. Blaise looked at him questioningly and Rose giggled.

“This is Snidget’s godfather, Remus Lupin,” Rose told him. “He’s going to teach Care of Magical Creatures at Hogwarts this year.”

Blaise’s insolent smirk drooped a little at this piece of information and he muttered a sedate, “Hello, Professor.”

“Have a good term,” Mum said, pinching Rose’s cheeks, “Send us a letter as soon as you can.”

“Bye-bye,” Uncle Padfoot smiled.

Rose climbed up onto the train and hugged her father one last time. “Bye, Daddy,” she whispered, “Don’t work too hard.”

Daddy chuckled as Blaise swung up onto the train next to her, Uncle Moony entering after him. The whistle blew and students began clambering onto the train in earnest – cramming up to the windows for one last sight of their families, waving fingers, handkerchiefs and cats, shooting flying kisses, shrieking good-byes, laughing, and smiling – a whirl of excitement. Steam blew, babies cooed, owls hooted, people screamed, and slowly, the train began to move. Rose half-hung out of the window, blowing air kisses to her family until the train turned around the corner and they disappeared from view.

“C’mon, Rose,” Blaise said, nodding at her. Rose hesitated for a moment, but Uncle Moony only smiled and shook his head.

“Go along now,” he said, “I’ll find a compartment.”

“You can sit with Ron,” Rose offered, feeling very awkward. “Or even with us, if you want...”

“A charming offer, but I’ve a simply fascinating, new book to finish – seven hundred pages, it’ll last me until the end of this ride,” Uncle Moony said, “Run along and sit with your friends, Rose.”

“Bye,” Blaise said, dragging Rose. Rose dragged her trunk by the handle, down the passageway of the train. She saw Ron sitting in a compartment with Michael, Padma, Hermione – and Ginny, who looked bored out of her wits. Ginny threw open the door of the compartment eagerly when she saw Rose and practically pounced on her.

“Can I sit with you?” she pleaded, “They’re talking about *books*, books for the love of Merlin, there. I can’t stand it!” She glanced up at Blaise who was standing next to Rose and a sudden, devilish smile crept up her face. She flicked her long, flaming-red hair over her shoulders and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

*Circe’s pigs*, Rose thought, sickened by this display. *She’s – she’s flirting with him! And he’s... he’s flirting back!* She didn’t know why she was surprised though. She’d seen stranger things than an admittedly very pretty girl – who knew she was pretty, to boot – flirting with a very good-looking boy who fancied himself a player. It was just the... unexpectedness of Ginny Weasley flirting with Blaise Zabini that had caught her off guard.

Blaise winked at Ginny and purred – actually purred, “I remember you... Ron Weasley’s little sister, right?” They’d kind-of met at Rose’s birthday party – ‘kind-of’ being the keyword.

“Ginevra,” Ginny laughed, shutting the compartment easily and walking out of her brother’s eyeshot. “But you can call me Ginny...” she whispered seductively.

*Oh, for the love of Merlin...*

Blaise glanced at Rose and chuckled wryly, "You can sit with Rom Lestrangle, if you don't want to sit with your brother's gang. But no sexy first-years with us, sorry – it'll just upset my girlfriend."

*Sexy, what?! That's not fair! How come I've never been called sexy?* Rose choked back her annoyance and demanded, "*What* girlfriend?" just as Ginny asked, "Who's Rom Lestrangle?"

"The gorgeous Tracey Davis – who's just gotten even more gorgeous over the summer," Blaise told Rose as the train rolled on. "Rom – Romulus," he clarified for Ginny, "Rabastan's son, sole heir to the Lestrangle dynasty. He's first cousins with Theodore Nott and Daphne Greengrass."

*"You, er, want to visit a crypt?" Rose said, raising her eyebrows.*

*"A bit," Draco sighed. "But I want to go to the Revels after the funeral! They're amazing they are, Uncle Rodolphus told me all about them; go on from after the interment to the first rays of dawn. There'll be a banquet and dancing and Veela in a masquerade and pyrotechnics made of Fiendfyre and oh, everything's going to be simply magnificent!" He looked gloomy. "I begged and begged Mother and Father to let me go, but they said I'm too young! I'm not, it's no fair, Romulus gets to go and he's only ten!"*

*Rose laughed at his resentment. "Who's Romulus?"*

*"Uncle Rodolphus's nephew," Draco said gloomily. "Rom is Uncle Rodolphus's brother Rabastan's oldest son, and he's the heir to the Lestrangle fortunes. Um, he's also Theodore and Daphne's first cousin."*

"Anything's better than sitting with Padma-I'm-so-bloody-brilliant-Patil," Ginny grumbled, "She is *such* a snot. Ugh, even Hermione Granger's better than her."

"She's hot," Blaise pointed out. "But, come on, let's drop you off with the other firsties. Tracey's going to think I'm snogging some other girl in a broom cupboard..."



"Trains don't have broom cupboards," Ginny said, loping in front of him.

"And Tracey doesn't give a damn who you snog – not that you've ever snogged anyone in your life," Rose sniffed disdainfully, "You're such a ponce."

"Player, darling, player," Blaise corrected her. "Tracey simply *loves* me – how can she resist my irresistible charm? She's the cutest girl in our year; I'm the hottest guy. Kapeesh, we'll get together in a few years, once she works off her maidenly reserve and sees how utterly gorgeous I am."

"Redundant, darling, redundant," Rose corrected him.

Blaise ignored her and threw open the door of a compartment with a flourish. "Greetings, insignificant firsties," he sang, "I come bearing a fresh virgin to burden your ranks of extraneous younglings. Play nice and I won't have to use the oak pointer."

Three boys and a girl sat in the compartment. It was the girl that took Rose's breath away. She was magnificent, a vision of heaven. There was no other word for it. Ginny and Tracey were pretty, Mum was lovely, Cho Chang was cute, and the Patil twins were gorgeous but this girl... she was magnificent, Veela-beautiful. A long sheet of silvery-blond hair, so bright that it was almost painful to look at, fell to her slender waist. Her skin was pale, as pale as Rose's, but unlike Rose she did not resemble a rabid, mutant vampire in the slightest. Large, leaf-green eyes, veiled by long, golden lashes surveyed the newcomers and the little, red lips cracked into a smile, dimples forming at the corners of the delicately sculpted mouth.

Even Ginny looked a little flabbergasted by the girl. She perched down awkwardly next to one of the boys, a dark-haired one who was reading.

"Take care of her, Rom," Blaise said, nodding to the boy next to whom Ginny was sitting, ignoring the girl as if she wasn't there at all. "Come on, Rose."

He literally pulled Rose out of the compartment and strode down the corridor, dragging her along with him. He stopped only when they were well out-of-range of the compartment and spoke abruptly, his words clipped, "That was Asteria Greengrass if you must know. Don't mention her at all."

"Why?" Rose demanded, feeling very confused, "She's so..."

"Her mother was half-Veela," Blaise said irately, rubbing his forehead. "A goddamn, half-breed slut," he spat in disgust. "She seduced Gawain Greengrass – Daphne's father – and well... *she* happened. Quarter-Veela, I bet she'll go the same way as her mother before her."

"Why shouldn't I mention her?" Rose asked.

Blaise looked at her as if she were mad to ask such a question. "She's a bastard," he said coldly. "Of course Greengrass didn't marry her mother – tainted blood. The mother died when Asteria was born – I bet Daphne's mother arranged that, bribed the Healers, perhaps, – and Greengrass was killed in a duel when Daphne was two. Of course Daphne's mother didn't take the easy route with the little brat and have her killed – she took her in and raised her. Not with Daphne of course, but she had her kept in the house, fed, and clothed, even though she was segregated from us. They don't want us mixing up the bloodlines again like Greengrass did." He looked at her coldly and the unspoken words, *like your father did*, hung in the air.

Rose sucked in her breath sharply and pulled her hand out of his grasp. "You shouldn't spend so much time with me, you know," she said icily, "You might mix up your bloodline again."

"New blood never does any harm," Blaise said, a wan smile flitting over his face. "If it's human blood – which Veela blood isn't, by the way – then it does more good than harm, once every few generations, keeps the children from degenerating into insanity and all the stuff you associate with over-breeding. I'm not fully pure-blood myself – no one in our year is, except Draco, Daphne, and Theodore of course. They belong to the oldest blood; the closest those people come to marrying a Mudblood is someone like... Pansy. Her great-great

grandmother married a Mudblood. She's not as pure as she pretends to be. Now, come on."

Rose glared at him. "Bloody bigot," she hissed.

Blaise laughed, slightly scornfully. "You're so naïve that it's almost charming," he said, "You've been fed the same old ideas, the stereotypes about blood purity from the cradle. Not surprising, considering your father and godfather, but still it's stupid. The world is bigger and greater and more complex than your inconsequential ideas of wrong and right. Give them up, Rose, just give them up. Learn to think for yourself and hurry up while you're learning, too. The world isn't going to wait up for you."

He strode down the passageway without a backwards glance. Rose nibbled her hair awkwardly. After a moment, she took off after him, dragging her trunk behind her, and muttering curses under her breath. It was so humiliating to be talked down to by a boy whose thoughts seemed to revolve only about girls, sex, and looking good.

*I guess he's deeper than I ever gave him credit for, Rose thought, I guess I'm not the only one who thinks about philosophy and that kind of stuff in my spare time. That was a pretty cool speech. Am I really as naïve as he makes me out to be?*

"Rose!" Tracey screamed excitedly and fell on top of Rose just as she reached the Slytherins' compartment. "I'm so glad you're here! I have so much to tell you..."

"Welcome back," Millicent smiled, petting her new cat.

"How do you think my new haircut looks?" Daphne asked, shaking her head. She'd cropped her once waist-length, blond hair to her shoulders and she looked rather pretty now.

"You look cute," Rose told her, shrugging off Daphne and kicking in her trunk, "Lo, Pansy."

"Hello," Pansy said, sounding a little cold as she flicked the pages of *Witch Weekly: Deluxe Teen Edition*.

Rose shoved Crabbe and Goyle and fell down next to Draco. "Hellooooooooo, Drakey-poo," she cooed, "How *are* you?"

Draco continued staring out of the window, like he had been ever since she'd entered the compartment, ignoring her pointedly. Blaise playfully shoved him, a sinister smile forming on his face. "I believe Demoiselle Potter just asked you a question," he said sweetly, dark eyes dancing with mischief. "It's not polite to leave a lady in the lurch, Master Malfoy."

"Zabini," Millicent said warningly, "Shut it. Rose, come and sit next to us." Her chocolate brown eyes flickered dangerously. *Come and sit next to us, NOW. Or else...*

Rose took in the occupants of the compartment quickly. Something was... wrong. Pansy's jaw was clenched tightly, Crabbe and Goyle were avoiding her gaze and staring at each other, Tracey was clenching her fists so hard that her knuckles were white, Daphne was biting her lip, Theodore was half-buried behind his book but even his shoulders were set very rigidly, and Draco's cheeks were very pale, his arms clamped stiffly together. Only Blaise was smiling. Wait a minute...

"Where's Neville?" Rose asked, scanning the compartment once again. Pansy, Tracey, Millicent, and Daphne on one seat – check. Crabbe, Goyle, and Draco next to her, opposite to the other girls, check. Blaise and Theodore on another seat, check. Neville... not check. "Where's Neville?" she repeated again, now a little anxious. She stood up, bracing herself against the train's jostling, not noticing the swift shift in the ambiance her words had evoked. Jaws and fists unclenched, shifty looks changed to startled ones, hands and shoulders relaxed, and the silence lost some of its tenseness.

Tracey was the first to react. "Neville?" she asked, taking a head-count, "I haven't seen him... Daphne?"

Daphne jumped, flabbergasted, and shook her head. "No, not once," she said squeakily, "I thought he'd arrive with you..."

"I didn't spot him on the platform, and I was there ever since the train rolled in, looking for all of you," Blaise said, "He might have..."

"I don't think so," Pansy said slowly. "He'd be looking for us lot, wouldn't he? Unless he wanted to sit with We..." She shot a quick glance at Draco and amended whatever she had begun to say. "Unless he wanted to sit alone," she said firmly, "That's right – alone."

"You don't *get* private compartments on the Hogwarts Express, Parkinson," Theodore said crisply. "Imagine the logistical nightmare it would create if everyone aboard wanted personal booths."

"I think we should look for him," Millicent said, "I'm ready to search the whole train."

Rose had already opened the door of the compartment and was stepping out into the corridor. "Wait!" Tracey said breathlessly from behind, "I'm coming!"

"And you," Pansy said silkily, turning towards Blaise, eyes flashing, "You, Zabini, are staying here to receive a pleasant, little lecture about the propriety of such seating arrangements."

Rose jogged down the passageways, Tracey trailing behind her, scanning every last compartment. She fought back the rising panic as they advanced down the length of the train and double-checked every compartment once again. Her legs ached from all the jogging and she was eventually forced to slow down to a walking pace – Tracey now lagged far behind her, murmuring feeble protests that they ought to rest a while, but Rose ignored her. Neville, Neville, you darling, nefarious, little pipsqueak, where are you?

By the time she'd finished her second examination of the train, it slowly dawned on her that what she was doing was illogical, futile and extraordinarily stupid. She'd let her hysteria overcome her and had shut off her brain, as Daddy would say. Frustrated with herself, angry at Neville and the world and practically wallowing in her anxiety, she forced herself to lean against a wall and relax for a few moments.

*Come on, think*, she thought to her brain, *Be logical. You're a brain, that's what you're supposed to do.* She wiped her forehead free of sweat, the back of her hand icy-cold. Gradually, her breathing slowed down, her muscles loosened and relaxed and Tracey caught up with her. By then, Rose had concocted a plan of action. That was what

she'd always been good at, drawing up strategies and executing them.

"My Uncle Moony is on board," she told Tracey tersely, "He's going to teach Care of Magical Creatures this year. I'll explain this to him and... well, he's an adult so he'll know what to do. Meanwhile, you go tell the others and um, if you can my friend Ron Weasley too, please?"

"Wait for a few minutes," Tracey told her softly, squeezing her fingers gently. "You're exhausted."

"I've been through worse," Rose said shortly, pulling herself off the wall with an effort. "Every second wasted is every second lost forever."

"You sound like a general in battle," Tracey informed her, "A dim general."

Rose stared at her through wide, surprised eyes.

"Do you think there's a simple, easy explanation that Neville isn't here right now?" Tracey demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. "He *is* Neville Longbottom, after all, isn't he? Everyone knows he's in second year and that he'd need to catch the Hogwarts Express today, to get to school again. Think of the crowd on the platform, Rose. It'd be easy for him to get lost among them wouldn't it? Easier still for his grandmother to just suppose that he hopped on board and that he was already busy with his friends and didn't have time to say a proper goodbye to her when the train rolled off."

"Are you, are you..." Rose swallowed hard, clenching and unclenching her hands in sudden terror, "Are you suggesting that he might have been... kidnapped?"

Tracey stared blankly at her through dark, foreboding eyes. "Anything's possible," she said quietly, gripping Rose's arm hard. "Did you notice the change in atmosphere when you arrived to sit with us?"

Rose tried to remember and then said, "Oh, *that*. Well, you all looked nervous and Draco looked angry. I didn't bother much about that because I started thinking about Neville and..."

"Forgot," Tracey smiled, "That's alright, if it had been my best friend I'd have forgotten as well. But, Rose..." She looked at her pleadingly, as if she didn't want to say something but had to. Rose couldn't understand what she was trying to get at and told her so.

She hesitated a moment though, looking like she had bad news. "Don't take this the wrong way," she said carefully, "But I don't think you should come back after you're done talking with your uncle. Sit with Ron Weasley and his friends or anyone else, but... not with Draco, please. I'll have Crabbe carry your trunk to Ron's compartment. And, um, Rose, please don't listen to Blaise. Just... ignore him. He's trying to stir up mischief, and er, that's not good. And sort of, you know, ignore Draco a bit and everything will be fine. Really, it will."

"Why?" Rose asked, feeling tired again now, not really able to deal with all this information at once: Blaise could be philosophical when he wanted to be, Neville was lost, and she was expected to ignore Draco. Excuse me? Information Overload!

Tracey looked up at her, frown-lines creasing her forehead. "I think you know why," she said finally, "I think you know very well, why."

"No I don't," Rose snapped, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm not bloody Pansy Iolanthe Parkinson."

Tracey flinched at the use of the swear-word and shook her head reprimandingly. "Don't curse, Rose," she scolded her, "It's not nice."

"Yeah, well, life's not nice," Rose said roughly, "Get used to it."

"I won't," Tracey said obstinately, "I've never used a swear-word and I never will, come what may."

"Bravo," Rose said sardonically, clapping her hands. "Now hurry up and tell me why I've got to ignore Draco."

"It's your father," Tracey said quietly, looking down at her feet, "Did you see the Daily Prophet on the 20th of August?"

"Yeah, so what does that have to do with...?" Rose began, and then stopped abruptly. "Oh," she said slowly, "That."

"Yeah – that," Tracey said, lips twisting into a smile, "If it were my aunt I'd feel like Draco." She shook her head slightly, a weary look creeping into her eyes. "It's hard being in Slytherin," she muttered, leaning against Rose slightly and looking forlorn, "All my family have been in Ravenclaw for ages – everyone was really surprised I got into Slytherin."

"You're too nice for Slytherin," Rose said, patting Tracey's hair and thinking of all the times and all the people Tracey had helped, comforted, and kept secrets for. "How did you get in?" she asked curiously.

"Slytherins can be nice too," Tracey defended, "Look at you and Millicent and Vincent and..."

"We're all of us self-seeking, manipulative, violent bastards," Rose said coolly, "Especially Neville." She thought furiously about him. He'd arrived two days before, after a two-month sojourn in Scotland, but he hadn't visited her. They hadn't seen each other since early July. Why did she care about him? He didn't, for her, by the looks of it. Why was she looking for him? Nothing would happen if she didn't. It wasn't her responsibility. Why did she have to do it?

*Because I have a perverted sense of honor, she thought wryly, And because some friendships are beyond logic, beyond words and time and miles. And because you have to keep on rescuing the people you rescue the first time around – that's practically an unwritten code.*

She pushed Tracey off her gently, feeling stronger now. "Go on," she said, shoving her the other way, "We have work to do. I'm not going back, so rest your fears, but you'd better tell Draco that he can't hide from me forever. I'm not leaving and he'd better just accept that." She smiled and strode down the passageway, head held high, pace brisk, a bright smile on her face and strength in her heart.



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Neville Longbottom was scared. No, not scared. He was beyond scared now: he was terrified.

He'd tried to enter Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters seven times, but every time, after he'd taken off at a run, expecting to go through the barrier and sweep in on to the other side, he'd collided – painfully – with the hard, stone wall. Initially, he thought he'd been doing it the wrong way and had been convinced that just one more little try would enable him to enter the platform. Seven tries down the line, his conviction had faded to dust, and his surprise had been warped into discomfort, anxiety, panic, and finally into full-blown terror.

He was attracting attention now – of the wrong kind. Butterscotch was hooting angrily in his cage, Muggles were staring and murmuring at him, the station guard was striding towards him looking annoyed, and somewhere down the line, a clock was chiming eleven o'clock. *Damn.*

"Sorry, sorry," Neville said apologetically to the guard, wheeling his trolley away in a seemingly casual way. "Won't happen again, I promise. Yeah, no I'm not lost. Er... this was for a dare, that's right, and oh... I think that's my grandmother over there! Er, sorry, really, sorry..."

He dashed away, trying to reorganize his thoughts. This was bad. This was so bad that he felt like crying. *You're twelve, you don't cry. You face life like a man.*

Right, right. And what would a normal, self-respecting man do right now?

*Something manly.*

He wheeled his trolley into one of the station's empty waiting rooms and flopped wearily down onto a bench, rubbing his aching head. Storming into the brick wall, seven times in a row, had not been the best of ideas. Therefore, on to Plan B...

...Which was?

*Something manly.* He wished he was a girl, nobody told girls that they had to be womanly (well, maybe they did in the eighteenth century, but not nowadays) or even manly. Boys were always expected to be manly. It was so unfair. The situation itself was unfair. What crime had he committed that he was now trapped in a station full of Muggles, far from friends, family (he was sure Gran thought he'd entered the train without telling her, and had, by now, Apparated back to the house), and food.

*Maybe not food,* he thought, thinking of the gift money he still had, left over from his birthday presents. *I should probably buy a snack right now, to restore my energy and all... Oh, damn – it's all in Galleons.*

He didn't have a penny of Muggle currency with him. But thinking of money opened out broader avenues of thought for him. *This is London, isn't it? So Diagon Alley should be near and from there I'll be able to get help, contact Gran... only, thing is, I don't know where Diagon Alley is and I can't go around asking Muggles to help me get there either...*

He put his face into his hands and groaned, frustrated and confused at the predicament in which he'd found himself. He felt so lonely, so alone now. If only someone else had been trapped out of Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters with him, even that would have been better than being alone. Rose would have been the ideal choice, she always seemed to have a plan – even a wacky plan – for any situation. Rose...

He suddenly felt incredibly guilty and pushed thoughts of her away, immediately. It wasn't *his* fault she was such an annoying, little berk all the time – who wrote so many letters? Did she actually expect him to read them all? Answering every last one of them would have taken *hours*. He was supposed to be on vacation, and didn't she understand the concept of wanting to be alone, at all?

*I got what I deserved;* he thought wanly, *now I'm more alone than I wanted to be.* As if agreeing with him, Butterscotch hooted gravely.

"Poor you," Neville said sympathetically, kneeling down on the ground and unlocking his trunk. "Let's rest here for a while and I'll try to think of something... I'm not that alone after all, I still have you, boy." *And*

*now I've gone completely around the bend, talking to an owl... He fished for his pouch of Owl Treats and a quill tickled his fingers. A quill...*

He laughed throatily, wiping away the droplets of water that brimmed his eyes. He was going to be saved! He had an owl, parchment, a quill, and a wand! You didn't need anything else! With feverish haste, he rummaged for the things he needed – tossing Butterscotch an Owl Treat while he was looking – and then sat down, cross-legged on the bench, quill-inked, parchment in his lap.

*Dear Gran,*

*I know this sounds stupid, but I couldn't get onto Platform 9.75. No idea, why. I'm at King's Cross now, completely helpless. PLEASE HELP!!*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*Neville*

"Take this to Gran," he told Butterscotch briefly, unlocking the cage and petting his owl. "And do it as fast as you can." Neville opened the door of the waiting room and Butterscotch flew away, letter in his beak. Neville watched his owl soar into the air and leaned against the door for a few moments. Then he entered the waiting room, locked up his trunk and the cage, and sat down, ready to wait there for the next few hours until the problem was resolved.

**000**

"Rose, what happened?" Ron demanded, grabbing her as she entered his compartment. He looked very pale and his hands were cold. "Tracey Davis..."

"Can we talk outside?" Rose asked quietly, glancing at Michael, Padma and Hermione who were all shooting her curious looks. Without waiting for an answer, she took Ron's arm and pulled him outside, kicking the compartment door shut behind them. She leaned against the wall, facing him, and without prelude she began.

"I talked to Uncle Moony," she explained to him, her voice flat and neutral, "He send an owl to Dumbledore. Then we went to talk to the conductor – explained the situation. He has no idea how this happened, unless specific guards targeting only Neville – very likely, seeing as he's the Boy-who-Lived – were placed on the barrier to the platform. We can't stop now, of course, but he and the trolley-lady send out owls too – Uncle Moony wrote the letters – to the Minister and Neville's Gran. They said it could be a top-security situation, breach of laws if..." She paused, tears trickling in her eyes. Until she'd gone to Uncle Moony, it had only been a case of Neville accidentally not boarding the train. Now, the situation had reached epic proportions with monumental consequences if Uncle Moony's hunches proved true. She didn't want to believe that they were true. She'd die if they were.

"They think Neville was kidnapped," she whispered, burying her head in Ron's shoulder, needing him desperately, his warmth, comfort, and friendship. "It might have political implications because of who he is, and because all the damned Death Eaters might want to use him as a hostage, to bribe the Ministry to release Lestrangle and her cronies. He might even..."

"Don't say that," Ron said sharply, pulling her head off his shoulder and gripping her shoulders hard. He was as white as paper and his lips were quivering. "If you say it, it becomes true."

"It's all my fault!" Rose sobbed, now bursting into full-fledged tears. She could cry now, now that there was someone who could understand. Uncle Moony was very nice, but he hadn't known her for long. He didn't know what Neville – even if they'd grown distant over the summer – was to her, what he implied, what he meant. Ron did. "I should have noticed earlier! I'm a horrible, horrible friend!"

"I'm even worse," Ron said softly, tears now trickling silently down his cheeks. "At least you noticed." *And the guilt moves round and round and round*, Rose thought exhaustedly, the tears leaking out of her eyes of their own accord, involuntarily, feeding on their own bitterness. *Is it my fault at all? Is it his fault? Is it anyone's fault? Why do I feel so guilty? I haven't done anything.* Her thoughts did nothing to comfort her; on the contrary they made her feel even worse.

They stood there, leaning against the wall for a few moments, Rose crying stormily, – bright red splotches appearing on her cheeks, snot running down her face mingling with her tears – her pain evident. Ron wept silently – tears running quietly down his pale cheeks, a portrait of suffering and anguish. She was the Storm, her passions forever tempestuous, blindingly violent at times, never silent, never soft, and never submissive. He was the Silence – his emotions almost always in check and in control, never letting them run away with him – her power not a match for his.

“Helloooooooooooooooooooooo,” a voice suddenly said from behind Rose, “Am I interrupting something?”

Rose blinked, startled, and turned around, tear tracks still glistening on her blotchy cheeks. Zacharias Smith stood behind her in the full glory of his annoying-ness, his expression a mixture of confusion, surprise and fascinated curiosity. Rose sniffed angrily and wiped her face with the back of her cold hand. Hastily, Ron did the same, muttering an unenthusiastic hello.

“What’s the matter?” Smith demanded, not sounding in the least sympathetic. In fact, he sounded like a militant tabloid reporter on the trail of a new story.

His irking scratchy voice roused Rose’s fighting instincts at once. Blinding rage possessed her with the intensity and the suddenness of a blazing summer storm – anger that Neville was gone, that he might be dying now, that she hadn’t noticed until an hour ago, her fear for him, the pain and the guilt, the feeling that she’d lost control, of weakness and helplessness (the feelings she hated most of all) – and her former dislike of Smith flared into open fury. Unconsciously, the desire to regain some small measure of control by any means, over anyone, *somehow* drove her. Power. She needed power.

Without a second’s decision, without even thinking about what she was doing, she drew back her fist – thumb tucked underneath her knuckles, like a practiced fighter – and tried to punch him on the top of his ugly, tip-tilted nose. Her arm shot out with blinding speed, all her strength behind it (and she was no weakling), possessed by a demon’s murderous wrath, and almost smashed into his nose.

Smith, with an experienced combatant's instinct, realized what she was about to do a fraction of a second before she did. He just had time to turn his face around, before her fist collided into his right cheek. He yelped in pain, eyes widening in astonishment and his hand instinctively reaching out to cup his cheek which was rapidly turning as red as Ron's hair. Ron shouted something that Rose couldn't hear and grabbed her, pulling her back from Smith with all his force.

But Rose wasn't finished yet; she was still too angry, too frustrated, and too careless of the consequences. She wasn't going to rest until Smith lay, whimpering in agony, defeated in the dust at her feet.

She wrenched herself violently from Ron's grip, with such vehemence that he was sent sprawling backwards onto the floor. She slammed herself into Smith, clinging onto him with the tenacity of a Fury, as he crashed into the wall. Her fingernails pierced brutally into Smith's soft wrists, drawing blood that spilled down her nails and his wrists. She kneed him repeatedly and strongly in the stomach, drawing whimpers and holding him firmly in place against the wall. It wasn't easy, with the fight he was putting up – she received quite a few well-placed kicks and soon the corridor was spilling over with the profanities he uttered – but the combined drive of her fury and natural experience helped her, even though he was larger than her.

When she was satisfied, she pulled herself off and stood in front of him, watching him clutch his stomach in pain. She opened her mouth and began to say, "Have you had –" but didn't get time to finish her sentence.

Quick as a flash, he launched himself straight at her, without warning and they both tumbled to the floor. Rose was pinned to the floor, locked down by the weight of his body. She tried kicking out at him but her legs were trapped underneath his thicker ones. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of red and then Ron was trying to pull Smith off her, both of them yelling. The corridor was a cacophony of doors sliding open, gasps, cries, shrieks but Rose wasn't listening.

She used Smith's momentary inattention to grab one of his hands and bite down on it, hard. He shouted and she rolled out from under

him, panting, feeling bruises spring up over her ribs. *Sweet Morgana, he needs to lose weight – or I need to gain some.* She pulled out her wand in one fluid motion and still kneeling on the floor, she pointed it between the eyes of the blond boy lying at her knees.

He froze and suddenly, the corridor became very, very quiet. Rose's eyes blazed murderously, blood glistening off her fingernails, her jet black hair disheveled over her paper white face.

A curse blossomed to her lips but before she could say it, someone tackled her, sending her sprawling onto her back. Ron, who'd just tackled her, hastily picked up her wand before she could reach for it. His eyes mutely appealed to her. *You're out of control. Stop this now. Please, stop.*

Gingerly Rose pulled herself into a kneeling position and took note of the situation. Smith was pale and gasping for breath, blood trickling down his wrists, kneeling next to her. A circle of viewers had gathered around them, composed of wide-eyed first, gaping second and pale third years. The pointed absence of older years probably explained why no one had tried to break up the fight with spells – none of the younger years would have felt competent enough to split them up without hurting anyone. Ron was curled up at her side, the knee of his jeans torn – she'd thrown him with such force when he'd tried to restrain her – clutching her wand desperately.

Rose breathed in deep gulps of fresh, sweet air, analyzing the situation quickly. A small measure of control had returned to her by now and horror now replaced her fury. She was in a *lot* of trouble. With witnesses too. Splendid.

She would have probably gone on sitting there forever, had not she noticed a hand extended towards her. Anthony Goldstein's sweet, hazel-eyed face peered down at her, his expression concerned and not horrified. She took his hand to pull herself up and murmured, "Thank you." She pulled up Ron too.

Then she turned towards Smith and unsure, of what to do, she offered her hand to him. The gesture was symbolic in some way, she knew, but she had no idea how. She'd just fought and defeated him (without actual provocation) and yet, there she was now, offering her

hand to him to help him get up. On a higher level, that meant something. What?

Smith hissed various abusive, uncomplimentary terms at her, but he took her hand and tugged himself up. He seemed to be scared of what she'd do to him if he didn't.

"Sorry," she said casually, straightening her hair, and looking up at him. He'd grown a little over the summer and was now two inches taller than her. He'd been only an inch taller than her in October, and then she'd been only five feet. Now she was five two, so he was roughly five four at the age of twelve.

*You might be as tall as a beanstalk and as thick as a concussed troll, but I'm still the toughest kid on the block,* she thought wryly, feeling a little smug. She'd never been beaten up by *anyone* since she'd turned seven. It was good to know that her skills had survived over the years. Using wands to resolve a fight was wonderful, sure, but in a tight spot, good old manual combat always solved the problem. And she was better than just good at solving fights bodily.

"Try not to waste so much time squeaking like a baby next time you fight someone," she told him calmly, laughing inwardly at the expression on his face as she offered him advice. "You'll only waste your breath. Come on, Ron, I'm sure you have a lot to tell me." She flipped her hair over her shoulders, – in a close approximation of the characteristically sensual way that Ginny did – smiled sweetly at the crowd, and swept off.

Behind her, she thought she might even have heard applause.

**000**

"You were out of control! You were insane, you were stupid, that was just plain wrong and nasty and petty and... *stop laughing!*" Ron snapped, waving his arms like a windmill, his ears beet-red with indignation. "You deserve a thrashing, Rose Iris Potter! That was completely out of line and I'm going to tell your parents and let's just see what they have to say about..."



“Let’s see what McGonagall has to say before we get on to the topic of parents,” Rose yawned, washing the blood off her nails. They were both inside the ladies’ restroom – Ron had accompanied her inside to yell at her. “I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be *brave*, not sniffling little cowards who can’t lift a finger against a tiny little girl...” She rubbed her sides, wincing as she touched bruises. Somehow, she’d cut her lip, received a fine assortment of bruises over her stomach and very hard kicks to the upper thigh and just below the knee. Consequently, she was now limping instead of walking.

“Not much style,” she told Ron, sitting down on the counter and massaging her thigh, “But plenty of force. He might even have lasted a minute against me if I hadn’t taken him by surprise.”

Ron’s expression did not soften. His eyes bored stonily into hers, eliciting a laugh and a, “Admit it, Ron, he deserved it. He’s such a pathetic little jerk and...”

“You sound like a Death Eater,” Ron snarled viciously. “*He deserved it*, my ass! Well, Princess Righteous, do you have any idea of how wrong that sounded? That’s what a terrorist would say to justify himself! Criminal psychology works like that – “*that good-for-nothing deserved it, so yeah, me ‘n the fellas had a cupla ‘n then we roughed him up a naught*” – just before killing someone!”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Rose whispered, turning white again and clenching her knuckles tightly. “I didn’t,” she snapped more forcefully, “Do you think I’d kill anyone?” There was pleading in her eyes, a desperate need for him to say no, of course not, you’re not that kind of person, to reassure her but Ron was too worked up to notice. He was only twelve and for all his theoretical knowledge of the human psyche and the subtle hints that convey our emotions, he didn’t have much practical experience.

Instead of comforting her, he yelled, frustrated, worried about Neville, angry with her, “Yes I do! You’re so bloody violent all the time! You’re no closer to learning the meaning of ‘control’ than you were when you were five – god, you’re a psycho! Someday you’re going to lose all control over yourself and then you really *will* murder someone and

then you'll be all – *“He deserved it, he was such a pathetic little jerk and...”*

“You lying bastard!” Rose howled furiously, terrified that he knew, that he knew about what she'd seen in the Mirror of Erised, disoriented from guilt, pain, fear and wild rage. She leaped down from the counter and slapped him hard on the cheek.

“You're nothing but a supercilious little swine who thinks he's better than everyone else!” she screamed at him, “Flouncing around with that ice-bitch and that little know-it-all and now your precious, darling little Zacharias! You don't care about Neville or me or Ginny, you're still moaning and twanging and whining about your poor, pathetic past! Why don't you face goddamned reality instead of cringing in the shadows? You're too scared to fight your own battles – you've always had me to fight them for you – and now that you've got your own herd of nerdy little friends, you abandon us!”

Tears of rage were streaming down her cheeks again and she was panting. Ron's face was haggard and drawn, his bright red cheek – the one which she'd slapped – standing out in contrast to his other, pale one.

“Say something!” she screamed, hating the look in his eyes, his silence, his cheeks – one red, one white – but hating herself most of all, for not being able to restrain herself, for letting her anger possess her like it always did it in moments like these.

“You're nothing but a child,” he whispered, looking at her almost pityingly. “Sometimes it seems like you've grown up, but then something happens and you turn into a baby again. You know what, Rose? One fine day, you'll be what, eighteen, twenty, maybe twenty-one, and everyone's going to worship the ground you walk on because you can make people do that, somehow. But then someone'll do something to make you mad. You'll have a wand in your hand because grown-ups always do. One minute you're all fine and wonderful. The next moment someone says or does something, maybe innocuous, maybe to provoke you. You'll bring up your wand and you'll say two words. You know what they are?”

“No,” Rose whispered, shaking, backing out of the restroom quickly,  
“No I don’t, I mean I won’t, I can’t...”

“*Avada Kedavra*,” Ron said quietly, eyes blazing like stormy seas.  
“And that’s how you’ll kill, the first time.”

## **Romulus Lestrangle**

*"There are no true knights, no more than there are gods. If you can't protect yourself, die and get out of the way of those who can. Sharp steel and strong arms rule this world, don't ever believe any different."*

## **Sandor Clegane, A Clash Of Kings**

*As she climbed out of the horseless carriage into the breezy autumn night, Rose wondered vaguely whether she'd have to spend the whole year living off borrowed friends. Borrowed friends – better than acquaintances, but still inferior to her real friends. Almost everyone she met eventually turned out to be borrowed friends – Draco, Blaise, Anthony, Terry, Evan, Justin...*

*They liked each other fairly well enough – enough to spend classes and, occasionally, free moments making fun of things together, exchanging Quidditch maneuvers, and debating over innocuous things like raspberry tarts and comics. No great passion, no great love, no I'm-always-ready-to-die-for-you feelings attached – just a blissfully casual, on-and-off, hey-how're-you-doing connection. It had its advantages, no doubt, and was very comfortable when she was on the outs with her real friends. On a short-term basis? Yeah. But long-term? Hell, no.*

*Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, and Evan Hill, a Muggle-born Hufflepuff, whom Rose had initiated into the art of worshipping Quidditch, climbed out after her. Rose didn't wait for them but hurried up the high stone steps to the castle, admiring the way the moonlight shone off the stone façade of the enormous castle in passing. There was just something so regal, so beautiful attached with ancient fortresses. Didn't exactly inspire warm, gushy feelings in a person, but there was just something attached with them that made you feel like contemplating the mysteries of the universe and how insignificant you were in the grand scheme of things...*

*Someone pushed roughly past her, almost sending her sprawling onto the stone floor, and a hard voice hissed down into her ear, "I'll get you for that, I swear, you bitch..." She grimaced as a blond figure shot past her, massaging her still-sore thigh. Uncle Moony had done his best for the bruises, but they still hurt a little. Of course she'd been*

*forced to tell him the whole story (doing her best to look very repentant throughout it). He'd only shaken his head, asked her if someone else had given her a lecture, fixed her up, and muttered that she had her father and godfather's reckless penchant for picking out fights. She'd sat with him throughout the remainder of the trip, alternately napping, eating, listening to his fascinating stories, or writing in the diary.*

*The diary had stopped writing back to her, and for that she was very glad. Writing in a normal diary was, in a way, strangely comforting. No blame, no accusing looks, no you-could-do-better attitude, just... blank. It did make you feel better if you had nothing else to do after just having done something wrong.*

*Rose sat down at the Slytherin table next to Tracey. Pansy, who was sitting right across from Tracey, stopped mid-conversation, an appalled look creeping across her face. "Fick dich!" she spat, looking disgusted. "Of all places to sit down, you had to pick this –"*

*"Been to Germany?" Rose drawled, understanding what she meant. "Can't you swear in English like a normal person?"*

*"I'm not a plebian," Pansy sniffed, glaring at her. "Or a member of the bourgeoisie – French profanities are becoming dreadfully common."*

*"And, of course, aristocrats use German for expressing vulgar thoughts," Rose observed dryly. "Tracey, darling, what your best friend meant by the words Fick dich was..."*

*"Oh, don't!" Tracey squeaked, looking horrified, and plugging her ears with her fingers hastily. "I don't need a translator to tell me that... oh why does everyone swear so much, nowadays? It's not nice!"*

*Rose bit back laughter, as Pansy answered disdainfully, "Well what do you expect? Our feelings must have a vent. Some," she said, shooting Rose a dirty look, "vent it out on poor, defenseless, young boys. Some give vent to it in more appropriate, ladylike ways."*

*"Swearing in German is ladylike?" Rose sniggered. "And for your information, Smith is neither poor nor defenseless nor exactly young."*

*The only thing that rings true in your statement is that he is a boy – though with the way he was whimpering, I have my doubts now...”*

*“Gorgon,” Pansy hissed, “I shun you.”*

*“Pansy!” Tracey cried, looking disappointed in her. “Don’t mind her, Rose, she’s overwrought with all the...”*

*“She’s not important enough for me to mind,” Rose informed her kindly. “Even Draco’s given up minding her.” She nodded towards Draco, who had just arrived and, after a glance at Pansy, sat down between his bodyguards, Crabbe and Goyle, far away from the girls.*

*Pansy gasped in dismay. “Don’t bother trying to scavenge a seat next to him,” Rose informed her loftily, “They’re filled already. Unless, of course, you want to tussle with Crabbe and Goyle for the honor of sitting next to Ferret-Face...”*

*“I loathe you,” Pansy said sharply, a malevolent look on her face, before burying her head in her hands.*

*“Don’t mind her,” Tracey whispered to Rose. “She’s just worried that Mrs. Malfoy’s more interested in Daphne as a bride for Draco than Pansy... completely ignored her at the garden party the Yaxleys held last month...”*

*“Not interested,” Rose yawned, stretching. Then, with a nasty glance at Pansy’s dark head, buried in her arms, she added, “Though of course Daphne would be a much better wife for Malfoy... they’re both blond, completely pure-blood....”*

*“And nouveau rich,” Millicent added, sliding down next to Rose, “Don’t forget that. Lucius Malfoy and Gawain Greengrass married the same way – to buy back the old lineage into their families of jumped-up, glorified merchants. Narcissa Black and Cassiopeia Lestrangle – beautiful icebergs both of them, but don’t tell Draco or Daphne that, with antique, flawless pedigrees... what’s not to like? Cheer up Pansy; your family is much older than Daphne’s – even if it hasn’t remained pure for the same amount of time. Lucius would consider it marrying up if his son married you...”*

*Pansy's head rose from her hands. She looked more cheerful than before. She was even smiling – something that did not happen often. When the others blinked at her in confusion, she flashed her teeth in a broader, even more amiable, smile and said, "Did you see the new DADA teacher? Hmm, did you? Look, over there –"*

*"Oh. My. God." Millicent whispered, following the line of her finger. "Oh lord, it's not..."*

*Tracey squealed shrilly, like a chipmunk. She looked wildly excited, "Oh Rose, just look, can you imagine..."*

*"Gilderoy Lockhart, isn't it?" Rose said, squinting at the blond, rosy-cheeked man in extravagant, pink, silk robes patterned with cherry blossoms, seated between Snape and Sprout. Snape looked like he was about to explode in rage at what the beaming Lockhart was telling him, while Sprout looked like she was going to be sick. "My mother thinks he's cute."*

*"Mine slept with him," Pansy offered casually, "but you must admit – he's good-looking."*

*"He would be," Rose corrected her. "If he was, um, I don't know – maybe twenty years younger? He's not really my type."*

*"Aidan Lynch is, right?" Millicent asked, smirking. "Your type, I mean?"*

*"I'd do anything for him," Rose said fervently. Even Tracey and Pansy nodded in agreement. Aidan Lynch, Seeker on the Irish International Team, was beyond cute, good-looking, handsome, sexy, and hot. He was a god, to be worshipped by reverent, lovesick females.*

*"Those muscles..." Pansy sighed, her eyes shining, "ohhhhhhh...."*

*"That smile..." Tracey moaned, "it's soooooooooo sweet..."*

*"That everything," Rose said firmly, "muscles, smile, figure, lips, eyelashes – you name it and that man has it."*

*"I've got a ton of posters," Tracey began. "Lots of Quidditch players, you're going to like that Rose, vampires too, especially for Pansy, and lots of sweet, boy-next-doorsy types for Milli. We can start hanging them up tonight in the dorm."*

*"Thanks," they all said gratefully at once.*

*Tracey smiled and waved an airy hand. "Shh..." she said, "McGonagall's coming with the first-years."*

*And indeed she was, a long line of quivering midgets trailing in her wake. After McGonagall had arranged the stool and the Sorting Hat, she glared at the room until the din died down. Then she fixed her spectacles, coughed loudly, twice, and rolled down the list of names.*

*"Amberquaffle, Geoffrey!"*

*A red-haired boy, whom Rose recognized from the compartment where Blaise had thrown Ginny, scuttled towards the Hat, his flaming head bowed low. "His grandfather started the exclusive clothing line, Amberquaffle and Snitch," Pansy said, looking at him. "Mother introduced us once..."*

*"Slytherin!"*

*Rose yelled and cheered with the rest of her table, while the blushing boy hurried towards the Slytherins, a sheepish smile on his face.*

*"Bode, Alan!"*

*"Oh, I know him," Rose said. "Well, at least I know his dad – works in the Department of Mysteries... head of one of the sub-departments, Uncle Padfoot told me..." The boy was declared a Hufflepuff.*

*"Bott, Roland!"*

*"He's related to Bertie Bott!" Rose and Pansy said together, at the same time.*

*"Gryffindor!"*



*“Well, he must be brave to withstand a crazy inventor in the family,” Rose said, watching Smith leap up from his seat, cheering himself hoarse like the rest of his house-mates, and clap Roland Bott on the back as he arrived.*

*Names rolled by and children, in varying degrees of fright, nervousness, and excitement – all looking as if they’d rather be someplace else and blushing heavily – shuffled shyly, their heads down, towards the Sorting Hat.*

*“Creevey, Colin!”*

*A toothy, dark-haired, little boy scrambled towards the Hat and was promptly declared a Gryffindor. “Mudblood,” Pansy yawned lazily, toying with a silver spoon.*

*“Greengrass, Asteria!”*

*“Schei, Daphne’s bound to be furious,” Pansy murmured, frowning at the slender, lovely girl who shuffled forward, her silvery-blond hair hanging like a mane down to her waist, shielding her face. Rose noticed that, for all her presumed graceful Veela heritage, she was just as clumsy as any of the other first-years. She was declared a Ravenclaw after a few moments and, visibly brightening, almost bounced towards the Ravenclaws. What is it with Ravenclaw being the House of Beauty, Rose thought. All the pretty people go there – Roger Davies, Cho Chang...*

*“Lestrangle, Romulus!”*

*Rose now looked more closely at the boy she’d been told was Daphne and Theodore’s cousin. He was a small boy with very dark brown hair, fringing over his forehead and pale, almost translucent, skin. The Hat screamed “Slytherin!” just as it touched his head. He was welcomed by both his cousins with open arms. As he passed by her on his way to Daphne and Theodore, Rose noted the sad, almost wistful, expression on his face. Millicent stared intently at him. When Rose looked questioningly at her, she only shook her hand, murmuring, “I’ll tell you later...”*

*“Lovegood, Luna!”*

*Here was a first year unlike any Rose – or the others – had ever seen. She had long, straggly, dirty blond hair and even from a distance Rose could easily see the dreamy, faraway expression on her sweet, childish face and the oddly graceful, almost eerie way in which she practically floated towards the Sorting Hat. She didn't look down or blush like the other first years – she seemed calm and sure of herself, in another world altogether from the other children. It was very unnerving. She turned out to be a Ravenclaw and glided airily towards Asteria Greengrass, who seemed a little alarmed by her presence.*

*“Oglethorpe, Stalwart!”*

*“I wonder whether he's related to Dunbar Oglethorpe,” Rose said thoughtfully, glancing at the boy who hurried towards the Gryffindor table. “You know, the founder of Q.U.A.B.B.L.E – don't give me that look, Tracey, don't you know that it stands for Quidditch Union for the Administration and Betterment of the British League and it's Endeavors?”*

*“No,” Tracey said, chuckling wryly, “we're not all Quidditch fanatics like you.”*

*“Robbins, Demelza!”*

*The lithe girl with short, brown hair – Rose thought that her build was ideal for a Chaser – ended up at Gryffindor, much to Rose's disappointment. She looked like she had it in her to be a good Quidditch player someday – tough, determined, and staunchly supportive of whatever tactics had to be employed to win a game...*

*“Tugwood, Ermelian!”*

*“She's Sacharissa Tugwood's granddaughter,” Pansy explained, clapping when the pretty girl was Sorted into Slytherin. “You know – the Pioneer in the field of Beautifying Potions?”*

*“Weasley, Ginevra!”*

*Head held high, shoulders thrown back, with a defiant toss of her long, red curls Ginny swept towards the stool. The air around her fairly*

*crackled with arrogance, but it suited her – it suited her very well. Rose knew before the Hat screamed it aloud that she would land up in Gryffindor – and she wasn't disappointed either. There really was no other house for fiery, indomitable Ginny, whom Rose felt like slapping three-quarters of the time.*

*She was the last one to be Sorted. McGonagall rolled up her scroll, picked up the Hat and stool, and hurried away. Then, the food appeared on the golden plates and Rose laughed exultantly, reaching out for everything edible she could lay her hands on. She piled her plate with mutton chops, roast beef, chicken, mashed potatoes, crisps, fried lettuce, succulent pork, noodles dripping in honey, and assorted varieties of bread glowing like gold in the candlelight... in short, everything that smelt good (which meant practically everything).*

*She was so busy eating, she didn't notice when Pansy and Tracey slipped out of their seats and Blaise slid down next to Rose, in Tracey's vacated seat.*

*"Hungry, much?" he drawled and Rose finally noticed him. "Draco offered me the choice between removing myself from his royal presence or getting my nose broken by Vincent," he explained when she gaped at him. "Since I happen to have a gorgeous nose, I naturally preferred the latter. And I'd be doing a favor to two charming girls at the same time," he smirked. "Pansy could use the time to woo Draco back and you could use the time not being bored to death by that rattlesnake."*

*"More of a pug than a rattlesnake," Rose smiled, watching Millicent wolf down food. "I still haven't forgiven you."*

*"There's nothing to forgive," Blaise said serenely, waving a hand gracefully. "I had my fun and nobody else did. That's good enough for me."*

*"Amiable, aren't you?" Millicent asked coolly.*

*"Oh yeah... weren't you supposed to tell me about Romulus LeStrange?" Rose asked suddenly. "You were staring at him, you know...."*

*"I know," Millicent said. "I'll tell you later. Don't give me that look – ask Zabini if you want to know so badly."*

*"Well...?" Rose prompted Blaise.*

*"Not much to tell," Blaise yawned, smacking his lips as he ate. "He inherited his good looks from his father's side of the family – the Lestrangle men always turn out handsome in the end – and since his uncle has no heirs, he's going to be very rich when he's of age. His family's far more impoverished, even if it is slipping into the decadent end of the spectrum."*

*"That's it?" Rose asked blankly. "You were looking at him because he's going to be cute and rich when he grows up? Is that it, Millicent?"*

*"Nah," Millicent said, speaking with her mouth full, "he's mute."*

*Rose gaped at her for a moment before gasping, "Beg pardon?"*

*"He can't talk," Blaise elaborated. "Yes, you heard her right – though it's really disgusting the way she speaks with her mouth full, quite uncouth really..."*

*"Stuff it," Millicent ordered him, waving a fork at him. "Tell her the story."*

*Blaise nodded and began, shoveling mouthfuls of food elegantly into his pretty mouth. "He was born normal, you see, – well, as normal as you can get when you mix a timid Lestrangle and a vicious Selwyn together – and he stayed fairly normal until he was three." Blaise wiped the corners of his mouth daintily with a handkerchief. "The two brothers, Rodolphus and Rabastan, live together, see, with their families. You've heard about Rodolphus' lovely wife, I'm sure?" His lips twisted into a small smirk, but he continued as if he hadn't touched a sensitive issue.*

*"Well, in those days, she used to receive plenty of hate-mail – you know, the days just after the fall of the Dark Lord?" he asked. "They all did – the Malfoys, the Notts, everyone who was involved in..."*

*“Enough!” Millicent said sharply, eyes flashing angrily. “Blaise Zabini, you are not here to make accusations – you are here to tell her a simple, innocuous story! Get back to that!”*

*“Just supplying her with the back-story,” Blaise began, but Millicent only hissed angrily.*

*“She knows the back-story, well enough, you ponce! She probably knows it much better than you do, and you’ve no business feeding her your propaganda! It’s your mother’s business, isn’t it, – to spread lies and rumors and stir up trouble – makes good business, doesn’t it? Scintillating potential lovers with those spicy back-stories? You’ve inherited your penchant for unpleasantness from her!”*

*This time, she’d gone too far, Rose knew. Blaise’s normally good-natured, easy-going face, hardened; his handsome eyes narrowing dangerously. “Keep my mother out of this, whore,” he whispered. “Don’t get all virtuous on me, you with all your bloody...” He stopped when he saw the curious look Rose was giving him. His mouth tightened into a cold, mirthless smile though his eyes still flashed fire. “You’re so naïve that it’s almost charming,” he said sardonically, looking at Rose. “My heart aches at the thought of the things you don’t know, things you’ll probably never know.”*

*Blaise laughed, slightly scornfully. “You’re so naïve that it’s almost charming,” he said, “You’ve been fed the same old ideas, the stereotypes about blood purity from the cradle. Not surprising, considering your father and godfather, but still it’s stupid. The world is bigger and greater and more complex than your inconsequential ideas of wrong and right. Give them up, Rose, just give them up. Learn to think for yourself and hurry up while you’re learning, too. The world isn’t going to wait up for you.”*

*“And my heart,” Rose said coolly, putting down her knife and locking eyes with him, exchanging stare with stare until he was forced to look down. “My hearts aches with pity for the things you’ll never find out. Enough with the pity act, Zabini. To you I’m an uncouth, uncivilized barbarian, hardly better than a Muggle. To me you’re a theatrical, classy wimp who can’t throw a punch to save his life.”*

*"And you throw too many punches," Blaise said, smiling ironically. "What was that between you and Smith...?"*

*"He was asking for it," Rose said coolly. "You'd agree with me if you were there too."*

*"I'd agree with you if you said he deserved to be crucified," Blaise said huskily. "You're so convincing that I'd probably kill for you, if you asked nicely enough, with your beautiful eyes flashing fire and hell and..." His long lashes fluttered over his dark eyes. Rose noticed, for the first time, that he actually dimpled when he smiled. His swarthy skin glowed goldenly in the candlelight and Rose realized, not for the first time, that he was easily the best-looking boy in their year. Her breath caught sharply in her throat and a blush crept up her pale cheeks.*

*"Stop flirting with her," Millicent snapped. "Honestly, do you have to play around with every single girl you meet – it's perfectly ridiculous, not to mention, nasty and unkind and..."*

*"But she's so pretty," Blaise purred, "aren't you, Rosie?"*

*Rose came back down to earth, to reality, with a crash. Get a hold of yourself, woman. This is BLAISE ZABINI – bloody bigot, flirt-extraordinaire, superficial, wimpy, and vicious. He's a horrible human being beneath that pretty exterior. Remember that – horrible, evil psycho even if he is handsome... "Tell me the story," she said, ignoring her blazing cheeks. "Go flirt with Ginny or Parvati, if you feel like it, – I'm off-limits."*

*"For whom?" Blaise asked curiously.*

*"That's for me to know, and you to guess," Rose smirked. "Come on, finish the story."*

*"Where was I? Oh yeah – hate-mail," Blaise cleared his throat and began again. "Vicious letters, all of them. Most of them had curses embedded inside. The Lestranges had to hire a guard to check all of their mail for nasty enchantments, before opening them – safety precaution. Well, one of the letters slipped past the safety net and little Romulus Lestrangle got to open it. Can you guess the rest?"*

*"He lost his voice when he opened it?" Rose asked, wincing.*

*"Worse," Blaise sighed, "he would have lost his powers of hearing and eyesight, as well, but they got him to St. Mungo's in time to save his ears and one of his eyes. The curse had already spread too far for them to be able to cure his voice – you know those curses without any counter-curses. Hell, he was just a little boy, but from then on he's been mute and half-blind." Blaise looked angry now. "One of those militant vigilantes on your side – they were going for Rodolphus or his wife with that curse – but it ended up in an innocent, little boy's hands. Justify that, sweetheart. Did he deserve that because of what his parents did before him?" There was a hard, bitter smile on his face now.*

*"Don't ask me things like that," Rose said uncomfortably. "The world isn't fair and I don't have all the answers."*

*"You act like you do, sometimes, Miss High-and-Holy," Blaise said coldly. "Like the fact that you're James Potter's daughter makes you purer and better than the rest of us miserable Slytherin sinners."*

*"She doesn't," Millicent said angrily to him, "well, not most of the time, at least."*

*"Thanks," Rose said, grimacing. To change the subject, she asked, "So... why did he come to Hogwarts? How does he communicate with other people?"*

*"Sign language – he uses sign language. His Uncle Rodolphus has been coaching him in non-verbal magic ever since he turned five," Blaise said idly. "If anything, Rom's better than half his year, not worse. He'll do fine at Hogwarts, even though he can only do non-verbal spells, which are at a higher level. You've got to hand it to him; he's pretty powerful to be able to handle non-verbal magic at his age. Of course he doesn't have any other alternatives, but still..."*

*"Yeah," Rose said softly, watching the dessert dishes appear. She glanced down the length of the table to where frail-looking Romulus LeStrange sat, squeezed between Daphne and Theodore. "Yeah, I understand." She felt oddly depressed, like she always did when she was thrown back on philosophical questions. Why is the world so*

*unfair? Why do people, who don't deserve to, suffer? I've had a happy life, I've had a splendid life, why am I such a bad person? It's not fair!*

*The meal rolled quickly by and before she knew it, she was yawning as Dumbledore announced the arrival of the new DADA teacher, Gilderoy Lockhart, and the new Care of Magical Creatures Teacher, Remus Lupin, who was going to replace Professor Kettleburn. The Headmaster's speech over, students began to rise and, laughing, chattering, and yawning, to leave. Lupin caught hold of her before she left the Great Hall, beaming from ear to ear.*

*"Good news!" he said, smiling broadly. "Dumbledore just received the news – they found Neville. He was all right, nothing happened – just blocked from entering the platform somehow. Of course they'll have to investigate the matter, but he's fine and at his grandmother's house now, safe and sound. He'll arrive tomorrow evening. There now, give me a smile Rose."*

*In answer, all she could do was laugh and throw her arms around him, hugging him fiercely. Neville was safe and life was good again.*

***A/N: I changed the first chapter, go and read it, everyone! I've also been tying up the chapters, so now this is Chapter 41 instead of 43. You might not be able to review this chapter with a signed review if you've reviewed the last few chapters – Review Reject Code 3 pops up. You can use anonymous reviews though.***

***And no, drop all ideas of Blaise-Rose shipping right now. I'm not saying it might not happen later, but right now he was just flirting with her because he flirts with every girl – except Eloise Midgen and Millicent Bulstrode – he sees. And Rose wasn't blushing because she was in deep, pure, everlasting, true love with him. She was only blushing because he's cute and nobody flirts with her. Isn't that enough reason for a 12-year-old to blush?***



**I am a whining, temperamental, cranky brat**

**... And there's no hope I'm going to get better with time**

*"Darkness feeds on intense despair, uncontrollable rage, envy, vindictiveness, inner sadism – in short, on dark emotions. It thrives on itself. Think about Dementors – that's how they work. Creatures of darkness, they suck happiness and breed on anguish. They survive on their own darkness."*

**Remus Lupin to nine-year-old Rose Potter**

"Miss Potter! A moment, please."

Rose stifled a groan and turned around. She'd just been about to make a stealthy exit out of the Great Hall when McGonagall's strident voice intercepted her. Well, there was nothing for it but to backpedal and to let McGonagall – and Smith who was tailing her, a smug look on his face – catch up with her. It was the first day of term and she was already – judging from the frown on McGonagall's face – in trouble. Courtesy of Zacharias Smith, of all people. Oh no, it wasn't *her* fault, it was all his. Obnoxious prats deserved everything they got. They ought to understand and accept this and lead their lives meekly and humbly, never complaining, allowing those infinitely superior to them to bash them up and get away with it too. Why couldn't they accept that golden rule of life? Why did they have to have it hammered into them?

Because she was so going to hammer that into Smith's thick head as soon as there were no witnesses around. He deserved it.

"I don't deny it," Rose told the Transfiguration Professor flatly as soon as the woman was near enough to hear her confession. She glowered at Smith, who smiled innocently back at her. Damn him to hell. *What happened to chivalry, hmm? You're a Gryffindor and a boy – exercise some gallantry, young man, and stop being such a stupid, little tattletale!* "I hit him on the train."

"You didn't just *hit* me," Smith growled, his smile vaporizing as he looked up appealingly at McGonagall. "Professor, she cut my arms,

kicked me so hard I can barely walk, and bruised me so badly I almost entered into a coma. She also called me names,” he whined.

Rose roared in laughter. Between giggles, she managed to choke out the words, “Professor, just look at me – do you think there’s any way someone like *me* could do so much physical damage to a guy like *him*? It’s – it’s ludicrous! And I didn’t call him names either!” Being a girl, skinny, and porcelain-pale helped at times like this – McGonagall now looked down at Smith as if to say *you’re more of a weakling than I thought at first*.

Smith flushed angrily, but snapped, “It’s true, Professor! There were eyewitnesses – I can name them...”

Rose rubbed her forehead and yawned lazily. “Delicate flower, aren’t you?” she sneered, “I did whale into him, but he provoked me.” She drew a deep breath and allowed her eyes to brim with tears. *If I’m going down, so are you*. “It was about Neville...” she whimpered, a tear sliding down her cheek, and looked up, appealingly, into McGonagall’s face, “He said that Neville was going to die... he was laughing too when he said it... and we’re such good friends – Neville and me – that well... I couldn’t stand it, Professor, it wasn’t right of me but... I couldn’t help myself, you understand don’t you? It was just...” And now she burst out into tears fully, rocking back and forth on her heels, shoulders shaking.

She knew she’d touched a soft spot when McGonagall conjured a handkerchief and gently pressed it into her hand. Still sobbing, Rose dabbed at her eyes with the lacy scrap of cloth. McGonagall’s eyes were much softer and her tone was kinder when she said, “There, there dear – he’s quite alright now, don’t you fret... It was wrong of you, but I understand, quite well, yes...”

Smith looked like he was going to explode with rage – his cheeks flaming in fury. But even he knew wiser than to jump her in front of a teacher. Rose whimpered into the handkerchief, but she managed a gusty, “I deserve detention, Professor, and I’m very, very sorry... but I was so scared and poor Neville...”

“Professor!” Smith howled. “She’s lying! I didn’t tell her anything! I didn’t even know about Longbottom until Parvati told me. Don’t believe her – she’s just a scheming Slytherin...”

“Five points from Gryffindor, Smith,” McGonagall said curtly. “For name-calling.”

Smith’s jaw fell open in shock. Rose bit her lips to keep back laughter. Served him right, the arrogant prick. Score one for Rose the Awesome.

“Miss Potter,” McGonagall turned to her, “A week’s detention, every night at six o’clock. Report to my office.”

Rose nodded and accepted her punishment gracefully. She’d gotten off easy – she’d expected a month’s detention actually.

“Professor you can’t do that!” Smith said explosively, unable to contain himself any longer. He was practically foaming at the mouth, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets.

“Kindly refrain from telling me what I can and cannot do, Mr Smith...”

“Yeah, well,” Smith snarled – actually snarled – “Then I think you’re a bloody sop and this is a case of rampant favoritism!”

Rose clapped her hands to her mouth in shock. For a second, McGonagall’s jaw hung open in shock, her eyes incredulous. Then her face hardened, her eyes narrowed dangerously and she said icily, “A week’s worth of detention, Smith. Don’t even *think* of arguing, the nerve of you... twenty points from Gryffindor. Let this be a warning to both of you.” She swept off magnificently, her shoulders actually shaking in rage.

Rose leaned against a pillar and stuffed the handkerchief into her mouth, stifling back giggles. When McGonagall was out of hearing range, she burst into full-fledged laughter. She was a better actress than anyone had ever given her credit for. And it had been fast-thinking on her part too, and she’d actually managed to win over McGonagall – McGonagall of all people! Score Ten-Thousand for Rose the Incredible-est (who deserved her own statue!) She gloated

as Smith stomped around, swearing fluently under his breath, and occasionally punching pillars (to the bemusement of everyone who saw him).

*When in doubt, act macho*, Rose thought wryly. Stupid prick – did he really think he could bring down Rose Worship-Me Potter? It was so funny, watching him that she didn't go outside as she'd planned. There was still half-an-hour until class started – she hadn't been able to sleep well last night, because she'd spent so long napping on the train – and she had nothing to do, really. Why not watch Smith vent out frustration? He wouldn't dare vent it out on *her* (unless he was even dumber than she thought – which was a distinct possibility, actually).

Five minutes later – when Smith had run out of swear words and his fists hurt from attacking the broad stone pillars – he stopped and regarded her sulkily. “Coward,” he spat at her, “Can't even face your punishment properly. Oh no, slink and skip around it, even though you deserve it...”

*“I'm* not a Gryffindor,” she reminded him. “I'm supposed to be a coward. And incidentally, you're supposed to be chivalrous.”

“I am,” Smith assured her, sneering, “To *girls*. You're a hell-cat.”

He glared at her and opened his mouth to say something but Rose intercepted him with a dry, “Yes, yes, I know, you're going to get me someday and you think I'm a bitch. Deal with it.”

“What are you doing here?” he asked suddenly, hands on his hips in a characteristically feminine gesture. It made him look ridiculously effeminate and Rose chuckled at him. He ignored her laughter and said, “Well? Why aren't with your *friends*? Don't you have anything better to do than goad me? Hmm?”

“Its fun goading you,” Rose said cheerfully. “You get so worked up that it's cute. Reminds me of my little brother – he's seven, by the way.”

Smith didn't rise to the bait though. He was smiling quite unpleasantly now and said, “Oh, I see. Bet everyone's picked up on the fact that

you've got a terminal personality disorder – I mean, who wants to hang around with a bloodthirsty psycho? Of course Longbottom's not here, right now, but what about your pretty, little lapdog, Malfoy? Or Ron?"

He'd struck a nerve and, judging from his smirk, he knew it too. Rose's lips tightened but she refused to be provoked. *He isn't worth it, the freaking, little bastard... I don't care about Draco, I don't. I was mean to Ron, so that's my fault and I should apologize, but aside from that, he's wrong about everything. I'm not bloodthirsty – it's not my fault he's as fragile as a flower...*

Smith was still speaking, "... Don't know why he hangs out with you, you're such a freak! You don't deserve to be friends with him; you're so horrible and bratty. He's so nice to everyone and you're so nasty, all the time..."

Rose flipped her hair impatiently and snapped, "Sounds like you're in love with him."

It was amazing how fast his cheeks turned red and how loudly he yelled, "I am not!"

"That has denial stamped all over it," Rose said sweetly. "Repressed sexuality, much?" Smirking, she stepped out of his way and swept outside, calling over her back, "Ron loves Chocolate Frogs!"

"Hey, Potter!" a loud voice boomed. She shadowed her eyes with her hand and saw a large figure disentangle itself from a much smaller, slimmer figure. She smiled as she recognized Flint and his girlfriend. He grew over the summer and was practically seven feet tall now.

"Hi!" she called, squinting up at him as he reached her. "Wow – you're huge..."

"Troll blood," Flint told her. He nodded towards his girlfriend and said, – his voice much deeper and more mature than when he was talking to Rose – "Meet you outside Charms, alright? Bye." *How do they manage to snog?* Rose thought, as the girl smiled and hurried off. *Unless he picks her up or they do it on a bed... EW!!*

Flint's expression changed as soon as the girl was out of sight. Now, he looked very doleful as he said, "Bad news, kiddo. I've had to replace Tennyson with Malfoy as Chaser."

Rose gasped in horror and squeaked, "Tennyson? Alphard Tennyson? But... but *why*? He's not as good as Carlisle or Bulstrode, but he was improving! He's much better than Draco! Flint, you haven't seen the kid play have you – well, he's alright, but compared to Tennyson? He's a..."

"Disaster," Flint finished for her, wincing. "But it was either that or remove Carlisle, Bulstrode, or... well, you."

"I don't understand," Rose said in confusion.

"Didn't expect you to," Flint sighed, leaning against a pillar and looking very sour. "Lucius Malfoy, that's what happened!" he spat vehemently. "Bloody sod – either his way or the highway... Bought us, body and soul – five Nimbus 2001's for the team and well, I thought, why not give the kid a chance, hmm? Tennyson wasn't playing up to form anyhow, and Malfoy's built light, nice for a Chaser... He wanted to be Seeker, see, but I told him that it'd have to be over my dead body." He looked down at Rose fondly. "You're the best we've ever had and I'm not going to give you up for a couple of Nimbus 2001's."

"Thanks," Rose muttered, blushing.

"He would've probably started using threats, if we hadn't agreed at the bribing stage," Flint said gloomily. "Sure Tennyson's out for Malfoy's blood, but his pretty little bodyguards – Crabbe and Goyle – will be able to settle *that*. If you play like you used to and if all of us shape up a wee bit more – I've been working on strategies this summer – we'll have the Cup for sure, Malfoy or no Malfoy." His eyes grew slightly shifty now and his voice was wary, as he said, "Lucius Malfoy – he bought *five* Nimbus 2001's for the team. For me, Montague, Warrington, Carlisle, and Bulstrode – and well..."

"Not for me," Rose finished. She felt flat now. She wasn't angry or sad or even very surprised. She didn't know *what* she was supposed to feel. Confirmation that this was closure? This was the end of her relationship with Draco, of course – only a doormat would remain

friends with him after this – but was that such a great loss? Did she actually *care*? He'd been Neville's friend from the beginning, she'd just hung out with them.

*"I can do and say anything I want," Malfoy said grandly, waving an airy hand. "I am a Malfoy."*

*"Malfoy, Malfunction, Malevolent, Malicious," Rose sang. "Malign, Malady..."*

*Neville was grinning but he still said, "Stop it, Rose." Malfoy's face was pink with rage and Goyle was cracking his knuckles threateningly.*

*"Atleast I'm not a jumped-up little halfblood," Malfoy said coldly. "Watch your tongue."*

*"She's my friend," Neville said curtly.*

*"Of course," Malfoy said, his pale, pointed face twisting into a smile. "But that doesn't make her mine."*

"I don't care," she told Flint frankly, running a restless hand through her hair. "I managed fine on my Nimbus 2000 last year and I'll still do fine this year. I'm always up to form. It's not like any other team's going to whip out Nimbus 2001's – I doubt they have Nimbus 2000's. Malfoy might need his spruced-up Nimbus 2001, but *I* don't. I'm brilliant."

"Of course you are," Flint assured her. He clapped her on the back, like a doting older brother. "You're the best, Potter. Don't doubt it, ever. Run along now, class starts in ten minutes. Practice starts tomorrow – four to six, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday."

"I'll be there," Rose promised him. *Though I'll be pretty winded this week – Quidditch for two hours, and then detention for the lord knows how long.*

**000**

"Ron, wait up!"

Ron Weasley suppressed an inward groan as he heard the familiar voice. He knew what was coming up. Padma saw how his expression changed, almost imperceptibly, and understood. "Go on," she told him, frowning at Rose who was running down the stairs, from Charms class. "I'll tell her you don't want to see her." The Ravenclaws had a double period of Herbology with the Gryffindors, first thing on Monday morning. The Slytherins had double Charms with the Hufflepuffs. They hadn't seen each other since last night and now, Rose was coming to apologize. She always did after a fight.

*Perhaps this is one time too many*, he thought, a little grumpily. He was still a little angry with her – not much, really – but just enough for the thought of a quick, easy reconciliation to sting. *She lashes out, with or without provocation, in the blink of an eye. And then she says sorry and we pretend it's over, even when it's not.* Outwardly however, he rearranged his features into a calmer countenance and shook his head. "Why do you think I don't want to see her?" he asked Padma. Hermione and Michael were already heading down the dungeons for Potions – which the Ravenclaws and Slytherins had together – deep in conversation. Their topic was undoubtedly him and the Case Examinations, which were slowly but surely becoming common gossip material.

"You don't have to let her walk over you all the time," Padma told him quietly. She wasn't fooled by his lie. "Just tell her. Or let me do it for you."

"I don't need a protector," Ron said crossly, his masculine ego wounded slightly. Padma sighed and shook her head, muttering "*Men...*"

"Hey Padma," Rose said, catching up with them. She was a little out of breath – he knew that she'd probably run down the three floors from the Charms classroom to the ground floor, eager to reach him before Potions began – and her pale cheeks were flushed and rosy. "Good hols?"

Padma didn't even deign to mask the disgust and annoyance that spread over her features. She didn't like Rose – not many normal girls did actually (beatific Tracey Davies and the weird Bulstrode girl



could hardly be counted as normal) – and she wasn't going to sugarcoat that fact. "I'll leave you two alone," she said stiffly, squaring her shoulders and pressing her books to her chest.

Rose's eyebrows shot up. She looked like she was about to say something – most likely clever and caustic – but, after a glance at Ron's face, settled for a sardonic smile. "I won't keep him for too long, Patil," she drawled, in perfect imitation of Draco Malfoy. "He'll be all yours, after a few seconds. Have fun in the dungeons."

Padma scowled and retreated, her long black braids dancing down her back.

"She's got a temper for such a pretty, little thing," Rose said amusedly. Being practically five feet three, she could afford to call most of the second years little things. None of the boys had entered puberty yet and most of the girls were still in the midst of their growth spurts. Then she switched her attention to him, her eyes wide and appealing. "Ron, I'm...."

"Forget it," Ron muttered, hoping she wouldn't sense his annoyance with her. He was ashamed of himself for being annoyed, actually. *She's quick-tempered and yesterday was hectic and well, yes, Zacharias can be exasperating... I should be used to her mood-swings. And she is genuinely sorry; I'm being a bad friend to her.* But all the same, he couldn't help feeling aggravated. He felt like he'd grown a lot over the summer, facing his worst memories. He deserved understanding and empathy – something which he wasn't getting from most of his peers – not pity and fascinated curiosity. The world would be so much easier if everyone was as mature as him. "Just leave it," he said, forcing a smile on his face. "I was wrong too..."

Their make-up routine always went like this. Rose arrived in grandiose fashion to apologize, he intercepted her midway, told her to forget it, and put the blame on himself. Rose too began blaming herself, and then they shared a good laugh and all was sunshine and daisies.

"Oh no..." Rose began, but then she frowned suddenly. "You're mad at me," she said, her smile drooping.

"I'm not," Ron insisted, his voice sounding false to his own ears.

"I'm really, really sorry," Rose said earnestly, nibbling a strand of her hair like she did when she was nervous. "Smith didn't deserve it, no matter how angry I was and... don't you believe me?"

"I do," Ron tried to assure her. "Come on – we're going to be late for Potions..."

Rose ignored him. "You don't," she said flatly, crossing her arms over her chest, adopting a defensive position. "What, you don't believe me? I said I..."

"This," Ron said curtly, unable to stop himself, "is getting redundant."

"Well, it wouldn't, if you'd just try listening to me!" Rose cried, actually stamping her feet. "You're just a..."

"No name-calling," Ron said quickly. Name-calling always accelerated to sardonic comments, then into biting insults – all the more biting because they were true – and finally into violent fist-fights. And with Rose Potter, any physical fight would have very violent consequences.

"I wasn't going to!" Rose snapped, looking furious. "Honestly, I'm not a freaking five-year-old, the way you act sometimes it's..."

"I'm sorry!" Ron said, exasperated beyond measure. He threw his hands up into the air for good measure. "There – will that do?"

"No!" Rose howled. "Circe's pigs, why are you always so pugnacious?"

*She's been looking through a dictionary in her spare time, I see.* "Me?" Ron cried, indignant at this highly untrue insult. "You're the one who's always..." *Oh, shut up before you get yourself hurt. Literally.* He lowered his voice, just as the bell rang. "I'm sorry for being so... well, pugnacious," he said. "Do you accept my apology?"

Rose threw a malevolent look at him, and then walked away, her voice very stiff, as she said, "This has gone beyond apologies, Ronald."

*You're right, for once. Now's the time for flamboyance or we'll never get this mess sorted out.* Throwing all caution to the winds, Ron grabbed her wrist and hauled her roughly towards him. She glared at him furiously, murder in her eyes. "Let go of me," she said, her voice like ice. "Now."

"Not until you accept my apology," Ron said.

"I warn you..." Rose was breathing heavily, barely restraining herself. She didn't like people grabbing onto her. She *really* didn't like it.

"Not until you..."

"Oh for Merlin's sake, yes!" Rose screeched, kicking him in the shin. She took advantage of his momentary inattention to wriggle her wrist free. Throwing him a furious look of disdain, she marched towards the dungeons. Rubbing his shin and muttering angrily under his breath, Ron trailed behind her. *That woman has issues. She needs therapy.*

**000**

"When is Neville arriving?" Rose asked Uncle Moony. It was five-thirty and she'd already wolfed down her dinner and worked her way through half of her Transfiguration homework. It was while she was memorizing the theory behind Three-by-Two spells and attempting to put one into practice that she had occasion to miss Draco. Transfiguration was her weak point – highly ironic considering that Daddy had been a Transfiguration whiz, according to all and sundry, and she'd inherited his looks and personality as everyone said – she was ready to admit. But she hadn't known, until she'd been forced to complete McGonagall's devilishly tough assignment, how weak she was at it.

She'd felt guilty with herself for being so superficial – she missed Draco for a few more reasons than that he was brilliant at Transfiguration. His wit when he was cranky, his love of Quidditch,

the ease with which she baited him, his entertaining arrogance, and his pretty, pretty hair – all those qualities had endeared him to her.

*Gone are the evenings when we would sit together in the Common Room, attacking each other with parchment and textbooks. Gone are the mornings where he'd enumerate the wondrousness of Sugar Quills, while he wrote our Transfiguration essays, Neville did our Herbology assignments, and I helped everyone with DADA. Gone are the afternoons spent contemplating how Aidan Lynch's figure is both lean and muscled and feeding the Giant Squid meringues. Rose thought gloomily as she finally abandoned her Transfiguration homework in desperation. Then another thought hit her – Gone with the wind. Wow – I'm like, practically a poet. Or a lyricist. I have so many career options in front of me – actress, radio-show host (because I'm so devastatingly witty), international Quidditch player, Auror...*

She felt slightly more cheerful after that.

"Around eight o'clock," Uncle Moony told her, wiping sweat from his brow, a tired smile on his face. In answer to her questioning look he only said cheerily, "Teaching is far more hectic than I ever imagined. And rather awkward too – I've studied under McGonagall, Flitwick, and the rest of them and it is rather, er, disconcerting to be sitting next to them at meals. Of course, Severus, er, complicates matters as well... we never did get along in our schooldays, you know."

"That's an understatement," Rose informed him. Uncle Padfoot had filled her up on the back-story between her Potions Master and the Marauders. They'd both been astonished at how pleasant he'd been to Rose throughout the year, until Uncle Padfoot remembered the *other* back-story – about her mother and Snape being best friends. He'd also ordered her never to broach the topic to her parents because it was a very sensitive matter, etc. Rose was hypersensitive about sensitive matters. It was like she was overcompensating for her lack of sensitivity in other matters by being so touchy about topics clearly marked as 'delicate'.

"I prefer to call it politically correct," Uncle Moony said pleasantly, smiling lightly. His voice turned dry as he added, "You're following in

your father's footsteps, from all I've heard. Detention on the very first day – marvelous. Sirius will be delighted.”

“This is only my third detention,” Rose grumbled. “Not my seven-hundredth. And I only got detention the last two times for, er, my sloppy Transfiguration work – say, Uncle Moony, can you...”

“No,” Uncle Moony said flatly. “I cannot coach you in Transfiguration for the simple reason that I have no aptitude whatsoever in the subject. I’m sorry, but you’d only be worse off if you trained under me... perhaps you can ask Minerva for extra, after-hours classes? I’m sure she’d agree, if you only asked nicely enough; sometimes a re-analysis of the theory under an expert can work miracles... but, er, the idea doesn’t appeal to you, does it?”

Rose grimaced and shook her head. “I’m running on a tight schedule, you see,” she said gravely. “Things to do, places to be seen, and people to fatally injure – extra Transfig classes will be detrimental to my social image.”

“Spoken like Sirius Black’s goddaughter,” Uncle Moony said dryly, patting her on the back. “And, er, detention will not be detrimental to your social image?”

“Uncle Padfoot made detention fashionable twenty years ago,” Rose explained patiently.

“And, of course, anything Sirius does never goes out of style.” Uncle Moony actually grinned now. “I must remember to tell him – run along now. Your worshippers await your arrival.” He nodded at her and walked towards the Staff Table.

*He’s not Uncle Padfoot or Daddy – but he’s kinda cool in his own way,* Rose thought, watching two girls rise from the Gryffindor Table and hurry towards her. “Hey Ginny!” she called aloud, grinning in response to the beaming redhead. Clearly, Ginny was enjoying Hogwarts.

“Rose!” Ginny squealed piercingly, “You won’t believe...”

“Hey Demelza,” Rose told the shyly smiling, brown-haired girl next to Ginny. “Demelza Robbins, right?”

The girl gave a start of surprise and even Ginny’s brows rose enquiringly. “How did you...” Ginny began, but Rose intercepted her, taking in the brown-haired girl’s height and figure at a glance. She was forced to readjust her opinion of the girl, from yesterday. *You’re going to be a brilliant Chaser someday, kid – long legs, sinewy figure, and nice hands too. You look pretty tough too – pity you’re in Gryffindor.*

“I don’t forget people like you,” Rose told Demelza. She had to grin at her own comment – *I sound like I’m in the Mafia or something!* “Quidditch,” she explained in response to the looks the two girls shot her. “You play Chaser, right? You’ve had a long career of pruning guys’ egos on the pitch, too, hmm? You’re so good at what you do that you’ve stopped being cocky about it too – you know what you can do and what you can’t, you listen to good advice, and you’ve got a subscription to the Q.U.A.B.B.L.E magazines. Am I right?”

Demelza looked dumbfounded, but she managed to nod her head weakly. “What...” she began but Ginny, grinning madly, shook her head and slapped Rose fondly on the back.

“You,” Ginny informed Demelza gravely, “are looking at the future Seeker of the Falmouth Falcons. She’s going to win the Quidditch World Cup someday and be featured on every single Quidditch magazine in the world as a prodigy. Meet Rose Potter, the only first-year player on a Quidditch House Team in a century. Now, you can scream if you want to.”

Demelza looked like she wanted to, but restrained herself. Her eyes were shining in amazement, delight, and something very close to blind worship. Rose felt very smug – that had been a very good speech. “You’re right,” Demelza whispered, “Absolutely, positively – Merlin’s tablecloth, even my Auntie Bridget couldn’t have put it better and she’s... she plays for the Ballycastle Bats.”

“Bridget... Vreeland?” Rose pursed up her lips in thought. “Um... she’s a Beater, yeah? First female Beater on the Bats since Josephine Bhaer, fifty-seven years ago? Am I right?”

“Stop spitting out the Quidditch statistics,” Ginny reprimanded her. “We all know you’ve got them all memorized – but a little modesty never hurt anyone.”

“I’m not anyone,” Rose reminded her, smirking. “I’m a prodigy – as you so aptly put it yourself.”

“And, of course, nobody ever had the heart to accuse you of humility,” Ginny sighed. “Don’t you have detention now? We heard Zacharias Smith boasting to Parvati Patil about how he got you stuck with McGonagall for a week.”

“That cow. I got him stuck with McGonagall for tonight, too,” Rose said sulkily. “It’s a really great story – remind me to tell you, sometime. I’ve really got to rush now – bye Gin, take care Demelza.”

**000**

*It wasn’t so bad*, Rose thought, rubbing her hands wearily and emerging from McGonagall’s office two hours later. *Just a couple thousand lines, that’s all... looks like sourpuss isn’t taking it as well as me.*

Smith, looking even more acerbic than usual, swept out from McGonagall’s office like a frosty zephyr, making a point to shove into her on his way. “Keep that face on and in five years, you’ll look like Snape!” Rose yelled to him. “Parvati Patil won’t even *think* of going out with you, if you do!”

Smith whirled around on the spot and glared at her fiercely. He had a very, very soft spot for Parvati Patil – as all the second-years, Parvati included – knew. He’d never made a pretense of concealing his feelings for the pretty girl and she, in turn, had never put up a false charade of hiding her attraction for him. They looked nice together, – Smith’s tousled, blond curls contrasting well with Parvati’s straight, black hair – Padma approved of Smith, and Smith had staked out his ‘territory’ too well for any of the other boys to feel brave enough to ask Parvati out. Sure it was sexist, but when Zacharias Smith meant business, you didn’t interfere – unless of course you were Rose Potter. Parvati hardly seemed to mind that Smith was scaring off her other admirers – and she had many of them.

*They'll be sipping a single Butterbeer with two straws in two years. They'll get married in five years,* Rose often thought contemptuously. *Circe's pigs, doesn't that girl have any spine? She's twelve years old, for God's sake, not freaking thirty-two. Nothing good comes out of school romances – they never last.*

Well, her parents' marriage had lasted – but that was an exception. Rose herself had no intention whatsoever of involving herself in any romantic entanglements before she was of age, at least. Quidditch, studies, friends, and family would always come first. She wasn't planning on turning into any of the pretty, little idiots swooning around the halls of Hogwarts, worrying over this, that, or the other boy. She had a spine and she was proud of it.

"You leave her out of this!" Smith yelled at her. "I don't know what your problem is but..."

"But what?" Rose laughed. "Am I too sordid for your precious epitome of chastity? She's cute, but you might want to consider someone with better taste – though anyone who'd be interested in going out with *you* must have atrocious taste..."

"I swear," Smith snarled, breathing heavily. "I swear, Parvati's taste is nothing compared to Goldstein's, if he's..." He stopped at the dumbfounded expression that crossed her face, and then sneered angrily. "Nobody bothered to tell you, yet? God, you're so naïve, you can't figure out anything for yourself, can you?"

"Figure out what?" Rose demanded, suddenly understanding what he meant, what Ron had meant over his hints to her over the summer – slipping in Anthony's name any time he could during a conversation, and then smiling mysteriously at her. "He isn't..."

"Oh, yeah he is," Smith said icily. "Pretty hard, too. The poor idiot's smitten, head over heels, yadda yadda. Just proves that anything's possible in this world, because honestly you're..."

"Bitch, demon, hell-cat, on crack," Rose mumbled, brushing past him and quite forgetting the situation. "Oh hell..." She lost track of where she was going, where she wanted to go, and what Smith was yelling – of everything in fact – in face of the pure shock. *He's my friend!*



Rose thought, indignantly. *He shouldn't go around crushing on me – it's, it's... illegal!* Then, aggrieved, she thought, *but what am I supposed to say? What I should I do? I see him around everyday and I can't just run and hide from him...* And then, angrily again, *Well, it's certainly not like I ever encouraged him! I'm not the type of girl guys crush on! That's Parvati, Ginny, and Tracey... Circe's pigs, Anthony's got bad taste... oh, right – I just insulted myself. How awesome.*

She ran her fingers frustrated, through her hair, surprised to find that she was standing in the centre of the dark dormitory. Her feet had led her through the castle to the place she needed to be: quiet, empty and large enough for her and her thoughts. Her feet were smarter than she was. Almost on instinct, Rose unlocked her trunk, pulled out her diary, and sat down, cross-legged on the floor, next to her bed.

She pulled out a quill and, suddenly, the words spilled out of her, blossoming like amethyst flowers on the cool, creamy pages.

*September 3, 1992*

*Anthony Goldstein has a friggin' crush on me. Circe's pigs, I don't know his birthday or what flavor of ice-cream he likes or even his eye-color – I think it's hazel, but it could be brown as well, I'm not sure. And he already knows what my favorite sweets are – he gave me a deluxe pack of Bertie Botts' Every Flavor Beans to me on my birthday – as well as my birthday and god knows, how many other things (Ron and he share a dormitory).*

*And, of course, the person who had to tell me was Zacharias Friggin' Smith. Oh hell, I could dismember that boy. I will dismember that boy once I get my claws on him, far away from McGonagall's watchful eyes... Or I'll chuck him into the Forbidden Forest and let a herd of centaurs trample him to death. Hmm... that might not be as satisfactory as ripping him open with my bare hands, but it'll probably be more painful for him... And then I'll use his eyes in a soup, sell his vital organs in the Muggle world for huge sums of money, stake his nose (it's the worst nose I've ever seen, even worse than Snape's) on a pike and present it to that spineless Patil girl, and feed his tongue to a house-lizard.*

*I could do it. I could so totally do it. I'm so angry with him – I feel like grabbing a really pointy pencil and impaling him on it. I want to burn him at the stake and then hang and quarter him and leave his body – still a little alive – out for the vultures. I want him to still be alive when the vultures and jackals come out and actually feel them gnawing at his flesh and bones, while he's still alive. That would totally serve him right.*

*Hello, a boy who I used to think was nice and normal, has a crush on me! And Smith, bloody Smith, has to scream that out to me in a public corridor just because I started on his pretty little Parvati! I mean, please!! It wasn't even a compliment – it was like, an insult. I don't want guys crushing on me – well, maybe except Blaise, but that's different because Blaise doesn't have a crush on anyone (not really even on Tracey) and he's hot. Yeah, yeah, I know, I whine about how Ginny is so pretty all the time but trust me, I know why I'm not pretty. I wouldn't be able to maintain my prettiness – I'm the lowest of low-maintenance (my toilette consists of brushing my teeth, showering, and brushing my hair, just the bland basics) – and I sure as hell can't flirt.*

*God, what is Anthony's problem? What ails him? He's shorter than I am, he actually looks more feminine, I swear, (well, he hasn't got a square jawline) and um, I think his eyes are hazel. I don't think they're brown, they're kinda golden-ish, but a wee-bit sky-bluish too...*

*I hate boys, I really do. Either they're incompetent or they're unpleasant or they're stupid or they manhandle me! Yes, Ron had the nerve to do that today, the pervert!!*

*...Well maybe not pervert. He's as perverted as Tracey – which means that he's as straight as a razor and as sweet and chivalrous as Smith isn't! But still, he manhandled me. And, OK, I do that to him all the time but, er I don't look people grabbing me. I really don't. I think I have a phobia about that – manhandlephobia. One of the reasons I'm SO not going to make a good girlfriend to anyone at all – I'd probably sucker-punch them if they touched me without warning me. And really, you can't tell your boyfriend to warn you before he touches you – it's supposed to be spontaneous, right?*

*I'm OK with Uncle Padfoot, Mum, Daddy, Harry, Neville, Ron, Ginny, babies, and animals touching me (no grabbing involved) without warning, but not anyone else. It's because of an accident that happened when I was four years old. I still remember it because I have a few memories dating back to when I was two-and-a-half (really, I swear I do – only they're about chasing butterflies and cracking eggs together for a cake) and because it was the first time I broke a bone.*

*Well, Uncle Padfoot had taught me how to climb a tree and on sunny days, I used to sit up there and draw pictures of dragons (my whole room used to be papered with those pictures – now they're papered with posters of Aidan Lynch mostly). Mum didn't like it, but there was nothing she could do about it, really. So one day, I'd just wriggled onto my tree – I really did wriggle those days, I was a horrible climber – and there I was, sitting on the branches and eating a pomegranate. I remember that I was swinging my legs too and pomegranate juice was dripping down my fingers, onto my shorts too.*

*Well, pomegranate juice is hard to get out of your clothes, even with magic. That and the bright, sunny day together must have made Mum feel braver than usual because, after yelling at me several times to get down, she decided to make me come back to the house by herself. Worst idea ever.*

*She crawled onto the tree – muttering “Don't look down, don't look down” to herself – and then touched me, lightly. I hadn't noticed her climbing along and when she did touch me, I screamed because I was really, really surprised (Mum is terrified of heights and I thought the thing touching me was a tree-snake). I can scream pretty loud too. Mum was startled too and she sorta grabbed hold of me just as I was standing up, and then I lost balance – I was four years old, four year olds don't have much natural balance to begin with – and I fell thirty feet.*

*When I woke up, I was sleeping and Daddy was stroking my forehead in this soothing, Daddy-ish way. Mum was outside, in hysterics, and Uncle Padfoot was trying – and failing – to calm her down. Later I found out I'd broken my right arm and I'd passed out too. The bone re-growing process hurt. A lot. More than a lot actually, and I could*

*hardly sleep that night. So, I guess, I've always had this fear of being grabbed suddenly from then on... I know, I know, really weird, but hey, that's not the weirdest phobia ever.*

*Daddy is scared of nightmares, – he gets them when he's stressed and they're really, really bad – Uncle Padfoot is scared of spiders (yeah – can you imagine?), Harry of rabbits (my fault), Snidget of the color green (she absolutely refuses to wear it), Neville of starvation, Ron of Bertie Botts' Every Flavor Beans, and Ginny of having to cut her hair (Daddy tells me Uncle Padfoot was scared of having to do that when he was in sixth year too – his hair was so lovely and soft and shiny then)...*

*I'm pretty weird, aren't I, asking rhetorical questions to a diary?*

**Rhetorical.**

*Don't feel like acting like an inanimate object, do you? Well, that's too bad, Talking Diary. In my opinion, that is a very unwise course of actions. I could bury you in Hagrid's pumpkin patch if you made me angry.*

**I have no intention of making you angry.**

*Most people don't. I can get angry with or without provocation.*

**Then I'd best shut up?**

*Totally. I don't know what freaky enchantments someone put on you, but I guess you're fairly safe. Fairly. My dad's an Auror. He's told me a lot about dangerous enchanted objects. So I'm not going to give you much opportunity to think for yourself. I'm going to write in you, you can act as my dictionary if you want, but aside from that, no personal comments, keep your back-story about yourself. Get it?*

...

...

...

*Very good. Obedience is the key. You shut up and let me do the whining. Now, let's bring on the list of the 1001 things I have to complain about...*

**A/N: 14 pages! 14 pages, I tell you – w00t! Btw, I've changed Astoria's name to Asteria – it just makes more sense...**

**To ME!: Who ever said Draco's going to live long enough to 'end up' with anyone at the end?**

**To Amy: Oh, yeah, she is a nasty little bitch (see the title of the chapter). That's why I love writing about her – no one ever casts a bitch into the part of the main heroine, ever haha. Don't worry, though, she'll change as the years go by, everyone does. A story isn't a story without a lot of character development involved – which is going to happen to all the bratty kids here...**

**To anon: I love your observations about Rom and the vigilantes! Of course they didn't care about Rabastan Lestrangle's son – why should they? He's ZOMG!!EBIL!! and should be exterminated from the face of the earth just BECAUSE. Cool observation about Smith too – lets see what happens to his and Rose's relationship over the time...**

## ***Until the End of Time***

*There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief... and unspeakable love.*

## **Washington Irving**

Whining to a diary for nearly an hour and a good night's sleep could work wonders. For the first time, in a surprisingly long time, Rose felt like her old self. She felt... weightless, as if she'd shaken off all her cares and worries, all her fears and strains. She felt like she was floating on a soft, fluffy, golden cloud, over resplendent sunsets, shatteringly lovely dusks and twilights, and blossoming moonrises of indescribable beauty – looking down at the world benignly through iridescent, rose-tinted glasses. She was living in a fantasy, fragrant as a new spring, a dream as bright and pure as a new dawn. The world didn't stand a chance next to it.

*I will not get angry, she vowed to herself as she woke up. No matter what happens, today I will be very, very happy. I will be as perky as a stereotypical Hufflepuff, as studious as your prototype Ravenclaw, as enthusiastic as a clichéd Gryffindor... and I'll lay off the synonyms too.*

Nothing could destroy her good humor. She hummed – off key – while she showered and even shampooed her hair. Generally, she hated shampooing early in the morning when it was so cold and because it took so much time. But today, she shampooed her hair twice – using Tracey's shampoo. She brushed her hair – with the customary hundred strokes that Tracey had once assured her would keep her hair smooth and shiny – and took more than two minutes combing it out. It was very soft and silky when she gingerly touched it and she was proud of herself for taking the time to shampoo, brush, and comb it.

She polished her shoes for the first time in ages, folded her socks neatly, tucked in her shirt (instead of leaving it half hanging out like some of the boys did), and smoothed out the school-skirt (without feeling cross that she had to wear a skirt, instead of trousers). She pinned back her hair neatly and surveyed herself in Pansy's elegant, floor-length mirror after she was done.

“What’s the matter with you?” Daphne asked her, sounding a little confused. “You never take this long to get ready – don’t tell me you’re turning into Pansy.”

Rose was just about to say, *See the pug nose yet?* But she managed to restrain herself. She would be nice to everyone, she vowed – bratty Smith, bitchy Pansy, babyish Draco... She would be as sweet, polite, cheerful, and un-sarcastic as Tracey. She would be an angel. Or a Cherub of Joy. “I’m just in a good mood,” she told Daphne brightly, smiling broadly.

“I can see that,” Daphne told her dryly. “What’s the occasion?”

“Today’s a beautiful, beautiful day!” Rose sang. “Today, you shall see a golden halo appear above my beautiful hair and silver wings sprout from my back! I shall also borrow a golden harp from someone; wear floaty, white robes and spread love and cheers to all and sundry!”

“Stay away from me,” Daphne muttered, looking a little scared for Rose’s sanity.

Rose only grinned, waved goodbye to her, and bounced out of the dormitory. Nothing would dampen her resolve. She would conquer the world with her angelic smile, her goodwill, and the Sucker-Punch of Doom if the worst came to the worst... *No, Rose. Think non-violent thoughts. Be like Gandhi. Embrace pacifism.*

“...You look perfectly demonic,” Blaise Zabini informed her, standing in her path. “What wicked scheme are you concocting in your evil, little brain?”

*At least my brain’s bigger than yours... wait no. Nice thoughts. Remember that: nice, kind thoughts.* “Don’t you feel like dancing in the rain, today?” Rose asked him cheerfully. “It’s such a happy day!”

“First of all,” Blaise said, glancing at her slightly askance. “It’s not raining. Second, I don’t dance – unless it’s the tango with Tracey – and neither do you. Third of all, you’ve got detention and I haven’t got a date – so no, it is *not* a happy day.”

“Think about the flowers!” Rose squealed. *Perky, perky, perky...*  
“About fawns and rainbows and Aidan Lynch!”

“I’m not *gay*!” Blaise cried indignantly, looking offended. “I’m hundred percent male – even if I am shorter than you. You can’t ask me to think about flowers and Aidan Lynch, ugh!”

“Pineapple cake?” Rose suggested. “Tousled, white silk sheets?”  
*Yeah, that’s the only thing you like, perv... er, I mean of course you have every right in the world to think about that, you wonderful specimen of masculinity, with a huge Knight-in-Shining-Armor Complex!*

“Better,” Blaise said, still looking a little sulky, “Have you by any chance downed a gallon of Essence of Insanity? I thought I saw some lying around in the dungeons...”

“Sarcasm rolls over me like fire over a salamander,” Rose said sweetly. “Cheer up and be happy! We have History of Magic class with the Ravens first period and I’ve heard Lisa Turpin’s keeping an eye out for you...”

“She might as well be Eloise Midgen,” Blaise said sullenly. “Still, a girl is better than no girl – think I should give her a try?”

“Yes!” Rose said happily. “I am positive that your relationship shall blossom and bloom like spring flowers after April showers and emerge, one day, as a grand conflagration of loooooooooove.”

“You *do* know that conflagration means inferno, right?” Blaise asked her, looking nervous. “And an inferno is... er, I think I won’t ask Lisa out... I don’t do well with fire... Talk to me when you’ve regained your sanity.” He hurried away from her and Rose smiled warmly at his retreating back. *Being perky sure is a lot of fun...*

She bounced all the way (even though it was hard to bounce on the numerous flights of stone stairs) to the Great Hall, a dazzling smile firmly fixed in place.

“Anthony!” she called when she saw Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot exiting the Great Hall. She smiled brilliantly at them both, her



emerald-green eyes sparkling. The combined effect of her eyes and smile left Anthony tongue-tied and blushing. Terry snickered and shoved Anthony playfully when he couldn't answer Rose's greeting.

"Stage fright," Terry explained solemnly to Rose, while Anthony looked down at his feet, cheeks apple-red. Rose wished he'd lift his eyes from his utterly uninteresting feet though – she still hadn't learnt what color they were. Maybe they were brown instead of hazel?

Someone snickered loudly and derisively, while Rose was talking to Terry, and when she looked up, she saw a blond figure dash into the Great Hall. *That cow – no, no, I meant that sweet, lovely, chivalrous young man!* She swept into the Great Hall, beaming broadly at everything – the food, the High Table, random chandeliers. She spotted two boys seated at the end of the table – one brown-haired, one platinum-blond – and walked towards them, smiling.

Neville, a bun halfway to his mouth, broke off the heated conversation he'd started with Draco, who looked sulky, his arms folded over his chest. Rose expected a cold welcome – if one at all – but the one that she was greeted with took her breath away.

"Rose!" Neville practically shouted, dropping his bun and grabbing her. He hugged her tightly and Rose, after a second's hesitation, responded with equal warmth. The two months of silence fell away without a whisper of spoken resentment exchanged. It was beautiful. It was frightening.

Neville let her go after a few seconds and surveyed her. The first thing he said was, "You've grown a bit." The second was, "Your hair looks nice."

Rose smiled and nodded, but her eyes were on Draco. Draco was staring moodily at his food, his hands clenched in his lap. Something was not quite... right. Well, she hadn't expected it to be, had she? She'd anticipated confrontation, chaos, condemnation, crying even if the worst came to the worst... or had she? This was Neville she was dealing with. Neville, who had mastered the art of understatements and the science of exaggeration *together*, whose flair for histrionics matched his talent at Herbology, who knew how to keep secrets and how to reveal them at the most advantageous moment – well,

advantageous for himself, at least. Neville, whose sweet boy-next-door looks belied his cunning. Neville, who always had an ace up his sleeve, from whom she'd learnt manipulation, and what *not* to name your pet owl...

She didn't know whether to cry with exasperation or laugh because good old Neville – *her* Neville – was back again. "I think that's Blaise calling me..." she said coyly, a bright smile flitting across her face. She glanced at Draco, who was slashing his omelet in two with such vehemence that bits of egg were flying off his plate.

"You're sitting with us!" Neville insisted, in a tone that would brook no questioning. "I haven't seen you in... forever. I've so much to tell you and you, you've plenty to tell me, we'll catch up in History, but that's not enough time, sit down ... hey, good spread, isn't it, today?"

Rose perched awkwardly on the seat next to him. He buttered her toast for her, while she nibbled on a piece of bacon. He talked volubly of his vacation, the sights he'd seen, gesticulating enthusiastically, as normal a twelve-year-old boy as you could hope for. Rose grinned, asked redundant questions and nodded her head at everything he said, not even concentrating on what he was saying. Instead she looked at him, taking in his face hungrily, a bittersweet wave of nostalgia sweeping over her, her heart aching with emotions that she could not identify. It had been so long since he'd been the Neville she'd grown up with.

She shivered involuntarily as she remembered how he'd looked when she'd seen him last, two months ago, days after the Quirrell Affair. He'd recovered a good deal during the aftermath, but he still hadn't been, well... Neville-y looking then. His eyes had been duller, mistier, dark circles creeping up under them that she'd started to fear would turn permanent. Draco had told her Neville hadn't been sleeping properly after he'd returned to the boys' dorms from the hospital – and there'd been a woebegone, world-weary expression on his face – subtle enough that only his close friends could detect it.

He was much better now – much, much better. Actually, he'd improved from his original self. Either he'd lost weight or gained inches – she hoped for the latter, because it was very awkward

standing together, she being a good two inches taller than him. His face was as round and friendly as ever and his velvety-brown eyes sparkled with life. True, there was a shadow in those eyes, a shadow that hadn't been there before, lurking darkly beneath the veneer of apparently carefree cheer. And true, there was a slight – very slight – stutter in his voice now; in the way he strung together his R's, slurred his S's, and tripped over his T's a bit. He wasn't the naïve, little Neville Longbottom who had blithely boarded the Hogwarts Express last year – he never would be, again – but then... was she the childish, young Rose Potter who had accompanied him to Hogwarts so many months ago?

Life gave you scars. Every action had an opposite reaction. Sometimes the reaction was equal to the action, sometimes it wasn't (and mostly it was unfairly unequal). Sometimes, life liked you and left you with only bruises. But it always left you with something to remember just how cruel and grossly unfair it could be, something to color your nightmares, something to weep over on cold winter nights. It would never let you leave, unscathed.

And then, like a thunderbolt, realization struck her in the face. Suddenly all the little pieces came – no, *crashed* – together, fitting elegantly into the grooves of her consciousness. For a moment, she was left dazed by the beauty, the mysterious beauty, so just and deserved, the chains all linking together neatly, even gracefully, down the ages, across miles and centuries, the sheer magnitude, the colossal dimensions of every single little act ever committed with its own delicate, sensitive implications, all joining together and then...

She threw her arms around Neville, laughing uncontrollably, tears falling down her cheeks. Was this what you called euphoria? The highest plinth of ecstasy? It was exquisite, whatever it was, exquisite and in its way, painful.

"Rose..." Neville yelped, startled, "Er... you're strangling me..."

Even Draco looked up from his omelet with interest, though Rose didn't notice him.

"I understand now," Rose whispered, squeezing Neville. She was actually trembling, powerful emotions rushing through her like wildfire.

“Oh, Neville I’m so sorry, I misjudged you and I’ve been such a brute. I promise, I promise...” The moment felt worthy of a promise, a powerful promise. She took a deep breath and pulled away from him, tears still glittering in her eyes and down her cheeks. She gripped her wand, in her pocket, trying to regain control of herself.

“I promise never to stop loving you, no matter what happens,” she whispered, her whole soul in her words. “I’d die for you, Neville, really I would.” Neville grabbed her wrist, pulling her towards him, his other hand clutching his wand tightly. The tips of their wands touched, and sparks – flame-red from hers, blazing-white from his – danced at the point of contact.

“I’d take an Avada Kedavra for you,” she whispered to him, earnestly, without thinking about what she was saying, her voice a pledge, an unbreakable vow.

“And I’d kill anyone who tried to hurt you,” Neville whispered, caught up in the intensity of the moment, his voice as passionate as hers. Theatrics had always appealed to him. “I’ll always take care of you, I promise, Rose.”

They were only twelve years old, woefully inexperienced with this kind of magic, the magic that lay in love, in tears, in deep sorrows and deeper joys, in ties consecrated by the purity of children’s trusts and faiths and fears, and in dreams shared together. Magic was a way of life to them, beyond incantations and brewing potions, yes; it was the structure, the framework, which defined their existences. But neither of them, so young, so naïve still, could have fathomed the consequences those simple words would have on them for the rest of their lives. Magic, ancient magic, lay in more than spells and dusty old books. It lay in living souls.

By now, Draco was gaping at them in astonishment, all thoughts of breakfast forgotten.

“Erm... right,” Rose said, quickly noticing Draco. She blushed and hastily wiped off her tears. Draco, too, hastily looked away.

“Friends, again?” Neville grinned weakly, cheeks turning rosy-red.

Rose laughed and kissed his cheek. "Until the end of time," she said. "Come on, we've got two minutes to reach class."

000

They walked into the first History of Magic class in silence, Draco striding in front and ignoring them completely. He wriggled into a seat next to Crabbe and Goyle and arranged his thick textbook, sheets of parchment, quills, and ink-bottle neatly in front of him. It was the first time Rose had seen him arrange anything neatly.

Rose and Neville sat down together on a bench in a sunlit, cobwebby corner of the room, far away from the other Slytherins and Ravenclaws, who were trickling lazily into the class. Neville tapped his fingers restlessly on the tabletop, while Binns droned through the roll-call, his eyes misty and a thousand miles away. Rose had to call, "Present!" for him when he failed to respond to Binns dreary moan of, "Longbottom?"

Blaise had snagged a seat next to Lisa Turpin, she noticed. The feckless girl, charmed by Blaise's infectious, dimpled smile and honey-sweet voice, looked delighted. Rose felt like giving Blaise a good spanking. The boy was simply infuriating and she really shouldn't have told him that Lisa had the beginnings of a crush on him. By the end of the class – if Blaise played his cards right – her nearly invisible crush would probably blossom into full-throttle infatuation. *Imbecile.*

Neville tapped her shoulder impatiently. "Hey," Rose told him, smiling. It felt good, sitting with him in class again, being able to talk and smile, without a care in the world. It felt very good.

"Why did you hug me?" he asked, point-blank. "Not that I don't, er, *appreciate* it, it did sort of make things easier, kind-of... but, um, yeah – why, though?"

"A thunderbolt hit me," Rose explained patiently. She smiled when his left eyebrow rose questioningly. Neville had spent most of his ninth year practicing how to lift a single eyebrow at a time – in imitation of Uncle Padfoot. Now, he had it down to a reflex action. "I understood

something,” she elucidated, “A lot of somethings and, well... it sort of felt like a thunderbolt. Is that a metaphor?”

“Dunno,” Neville said. “It might be a simile – Ron’ll know. Never mind about that now – what did you understand?”

“That’s for me to know and...” she began, smiling sweetly.

“I can’t guess,” Neville sighed exasperatedly. “Oh, for the love of Merlin, stop *smirking*. You look like Draco.”

“My eyes don’t look like a crocodile’s,” Rose told him, wounded, “His do. I have magnificent, exquisite, radiant, luminous, verdant irises, remember?”

“They pale in comparison to mine,” Neville said gravely, “My incomparably, disarmingly, lovely orbs, which are the hue of freshly-mixed mud, of organic matter in the last stages of putrefaction...”

Rose snorted and Neville too, grinned. “Pansy would say you still have the same uncouth sense of humor as ever,” Rose chuckled. “She’s learnt to swear in German now and she keeps on calling me *Arschgesicht*. She sounds like she’s trying to snort something out of her nose.”

“Who’s uncouth now?” Neville asked dryly.

“But I’m gorgeous,” Rose smiled brilliantly. “I’m so gorgeous that I’m Number One on Smith’s Hit-List – right ahead of Draco, that Lestranger woman, McGonagall, and random passers-by. Can you imagine I’ve got detention already?”

“What?” Neville yelped, looking shocked and fascinated at the same time. “You must have set a record...”

“It’s a beautiful story,” Rose said, smiling reminiscently. “Uncle Padfoot’s probably shedding tears over his goddaughter’s feats of glory... up for a story?”

**000**

Michael, Padma, Ron, and Hermione took turns to copy down Binns' lectures. Today was Hermione and Michael's turn to write down the notes, leaving Padma and Ron free to sleep, play games, or chat. Padma was reading *Sense and Sensibility*. She'd suggested Ron read it with her, but he'd balked. He knew he'd never hear the end of it if Michael saw him reading a romance.

Instead, he was observing his classmates, which was, in its own way, an entertaining and educative (in what not to do during class) experience. Anthony was trying to pretend he was not looking at Rose every two minutes. Terry, sitting next to him, was rolling his eyes disgustedly at his friend's back. Lisa was sitting with Blaise, blushing at whatever he was telling her. Pansy was showing Tracey a magazine, while Millicent was snoring contently next to them. Daphne was copying notes, while Theodore was reading *Hogwarts: A History*. Draco was sitting with Crabbe and Goyle, his head on his desk, half-asleep with boredom.

Rose and Neville were together, whispering and chuckling animatedly. Their faces were brighter and happier than Ron had seen them in quite some time.

"You could sit with them," Padma suggested quietly, interrupting Ron's thoughts.

"What?" he said, turning around quickly. Padma put her book down on the table, bookmarked with a pretty bookmark Parvati had made. She surveyed him through quiet, thoughtful, dark eyes.

"Neville," she said, nodding towards the aforementioned boy. "*Rose*," she said, a hint of distaste in her voice. "You should sit with them, now. Don't worry about us."

"Three's a crowd," Ron said absently, though he knew it wasn't. He was just in a lethargic mood today, too lazy to actively participate in a conversation. Observing the pair was much easier, and more comfortable.

Padma sighed heavily. "I want to talk to you," she said, very seriously.

“You already are.” Ron hadn’t meant to sound snappish, but it came out that way. Padma always started her ‘serious’ conversations with that line – “I want to talk to you”. She reminded him of Aunt Muriel when she said that – Aunt Muriel in her billowing, flowery dress, mismatched socks, her face grim in spite of the bright red lipstick generously slathered on her lips. Of course, Aunt Muriel was as far as could be from Padma Patil but still, her tone when she wanted to have a serious talk with him reminded him of Aunt Muriel. It wasn’t pleasant.

When Padma looked a little hurt, he quickly said, “I’m sorry – honestly, I am. Didn’t get much sleep last night...” He’d slept like a log, actually, but she didn’t need to know that.

Padma nodded gravely at his boldfaced lie. Her face became grimmer still. “The Case Examinations?” she asked, her voice very low.

Since she seemed to expect him to say yes, he nodded. Why disappoint her over trifles like the truth?

“I’m sorry,” she said, very earnestly.

*What for? It was never your fault.* “Thank you,” he said, because he thought he was supposed to say that. Maybe it was hardwired into girls to act sad and depressed and apologize when confronted with things like untimely, gruesome deaths. Come to think of it, perhaps it was hardwired into the entire human race. But why? It wasn’t their fault. Why apologize? *Maybe I’ll ask Uncle Padfoot. He always has honest answers. Either that or he doesn’t have answers.*

“I don’t want to, erm, intrude,” Padma said, her voice shy and nervous. Tentatively, she put her soft, brown hand over his. “If you want, I’ll just...” She gestured towards Eloise Midgen, who was sitting alone – like always.

“No, no, of course not,” Ron said quickly. “I’m the one who was snappish – really, it’s alright and I’m sorry.”



Padma smiled timidly, but there was a slightly aggravated gleam in her eyes. "Can I, er, say something?" she asked softly. "Promise you won't get mad?"

*If Rose Potter makes me mad only four times out of ten, then technically, you can only make me mad zero point three times out of ten.* "Sure," Ron shrugged. "Fire away."

"Maybe it's tactless and, well, wrong of me to say this," Padma said, blushing a little. "I mean, I haven't known you as long as well, those two, but I've known you for a year and it's like..."

"Yeah?" Ron asked, interested in what she was trying to get at.

"I mean you're the nicest boy I've ever met – really, really nice, I mean – and that's why everyone likes you so much, because you're so sweet and self-effacing and smart too, not at all uncouth and uncivilized like *most* boys are... but, well..." Padma hesitated for a moment, and then plunged on. "You apologize too much."

It took a moment for the implication of her words to sink. At first, Ron had been extremely flattered. He'd been so flattered that his ears had started turning red and he'd been on the verge of leaping up on the table and singing, "Take that, all you losers! I'm sweet and smart and self-effacing, nyah nyah – while the rest of you are uncouth and uncivilized! Mwahahahaha!" But then... what had she meant at the end? "I don't get you," he said blankly.

Padma sighed patiently. "You're always saying sorry," she said earnestly. "Even when it's not your fault, even when it's not even *close* to your fault. Like yesterday – I heard most of your conversation with Rose. You started apologizing midway through, even though it was *completely* her fault."

"I wouldn't say that," Ron said dryly, thinking of the insults he'd hurled at Rose. Well, it had been most of her fault, but it had been some of his too.

Padma tapped her foot impatiently. "That's another thing," she said, her voice hard. "You always give in to Rose – it's her-this or her-that. She walks over you; she doesn't care about you at all! You're always

doing things for her and she's always so ungrateful – and nasty too, sometimes! Can't control her temper at all, honestly – and she thinks so much about herself! She's such a little..." Padma stopped mid-sentence, with a side-glance at him. "Witch," she hastily finished.

"You wanted to say bitch, didn't you?" Ron asked quietly.

Padma gaped at him but then nodded defiantly. "Yes," she said sharply, "Admit it – she is."

Ron pondered over that for a moment and then nodded. "Yes," he said evenly. "Point taken. She is."

"So, that means that you should..."

"But she's also," Ron said quietly, "Every bit as sweet and smart and self-effacing – when she feels like it – as me." *A sweet, smart, self-effacing bitch – well, anything's possible in this world, isn't it?*

Padma stared at him, looking shell-shocked.

"Let me explain," he told her softly, rubbing his temples and sighing. He was in for a big speech, he knew – *trust me to pick a day to deliver a speech when I feel too lazy to conduct a conversation with my two best friends* – but it needed to be delivered. They'd always be picking bones over the controversial topic of Rose Potter if he didn't settle the discussion once and for all.

"We've been together for years," Ron said. "Over six, in fact. We've been through thick and thin, all three of us. She was the first friend I made after... well, you know, that day. I didn't talk much those days – in fact, I practically stopped talking to anyone at all for, er, eleven months after the incident – but she did. She was the sort of kid any kid would want to be – always climbing trees or swimming or playing Quidditch or running. She never sulked, she was always fun to be around – even if you didn't talk – and her mum reminded me of mine. I hung around their house all the time and she taught me loads of things – even though we only spoke once to each other in our first eleven months together.

Rose was always very protective of me. She kind-of sheltered me from everything – Neville and Ginny’s tantrums, falling from trees, boredom, loneliness. That’s her way – she looks after people if she feels they need it (even if they don’t think so). She made me feel needed, wanted. She doles out love and hate generously to everyone. She’s crass sometimes, but she cares a lot – more than she lets on. She gives me as much as I give her, sometimes more, sometimes less, who cares? It’s not an alliance, it’s a friendship. We’re friends, we’ll always be, Padma.”

“I see,” Padma said quietly. “I do. That was very beautiful, Ron, and I think I, well, understand what’s going on between you three more now. You’re very close to each other, closer than I thought.”

*We’re so close it hurts sometimes. Like we want to branch out, but we can’t. Like we’re stuck together. Is that good or is it bad?* “We’ll be close until the end of time,” Ron said dryly, smiling.

**000**

They were cleaning the cups and shields in the Trophy Room that night, under Filch’s eye – without magic. Yesterday, Rose would have been furious. She might even have made the mistake of losing her temper. Today, she was too happy to be angry or even annoyed. Filch’s obnoxiously loud comments about how truants were treated in *his* day – by hanging them upside-down from the ceiling by their ankles – and Smith’s hissed taunts when Filch was out of earshot, rolled over her, she was so blissfully content.

Filch was a jealous old male-hag and Smith was a jealous young male-hag. Who cared about *them*? Certainly not her!

“Your father embezzles public funds,” Smith hissed as he passed her, dishcloth in hand and looking very disgruntled.

Rose beamed at him as she polished an elegantly engraved golden shield, dedicated to some Tom Riddle or the other. Special services to the school, apparently. Ron had, with commendable patience and sweetness, accepted her apology after History class. Even Padma had contented herself with only a small, dark frown at Rose,

restraining herself from any derisive comments. Quidditch practice had certainly gone very well.

Well, at least it had gone as well as could be hoped for with *Draco* on the team. Of course he wasn't as good as Tennyson, but then again, he wasn't too much worse either. He was just... alright. Better than mediocre, but not quite up to what she would call 'Team Level' yet. Oh well, there was still almost two months left till their first match, which would be against Hufflepuff. Flint was sure to whip Draco into decent shape by then. The kid wasn't bad really, he had some raw, fairly good talent – but it needed development. Development which she doubted it would receive in the short period that was two months.

*Ah well, she thought cheerfully, the other two are pretty good, our Beaters are much better than those on Hufflepuff and Gryffindor and Flint is a great captain. And of course they have me. We'll manage, we'll manage.*

She smiled brightly, even as she scrubbed vigorously. Demelza and Ginny had arrived to watch her play. She hoped she hadn't disappointed them. She wanted them to think that she was as good as she pretended to be. Neville had been there too – cheering for both her and Draco. A toothy, brown-haired little Gryffindor boy – she thought she remembered him from the Sorting – had come too, camera in hand. It was solely on the basis of the camera that he and artsy Neville had struck up an acquaintance-ship – she'd seen them sitting together and chatting enthusiastically during their game, from above.

Yes, it had been a nice day, a very, very nice day even if she was exhausted now. She'd played for two hours – you'd be surprised how exhausting it could be, practicing for so long – and scoured plaques and plates for an hour, until her hands were sore and red. Rose yawned tiredly.

"No lazing off!" Filch squeaked sharply as he saw her yawning.

"Mmm, yeah, sorry," Rose muttered, rubbing her eyes. *Lets see how you'd react if you'd just played Quidditch for two years*, she thought crossly, *Flint's warming-up exercises are no joke! The other guys need them, they're so obese, but I'm don't and shouldn't have to do*

*them at all, I'm so wonderfully, exquisitely in shape.* She grinned, patting her flat, taut stomach. Draco had actually collapsed on the pitch after they'd finished their so-called 'warming-up' exercises – which involved running around the large pitch thrice and fifty push-ups besides other forms of torture that Flint's diabolical mind conjured up when he was bored. Poor Draco... he hadn't got what he'd bargained for.

Draco... Draco...

She moved onto a cup that Ted Tonks had received, twenty-odd years ago, for his outrageously brilliant performance in his Arithmancy N.E.W.T. Ted Tonks was Tonks' dad. Mrs Tonks was Draco's aunt. Draco... Draco...

She needed to know where Draco stood in the equation. Neville had artfully avoided giving her a direct answer to how his relationship with the other boy stood, how Draco viewed her and Ron... Draco had sat next to Crabbe and Goyle at lunch and class, but she'd seen Neville and him walking back to the Common Room together after Quidditch practice had been over and she'd started to leave for detention. They hadn't been exactly arm-in-arm, but they'd been walking together, there was no doubt about that. What was that supposed to mean? And what had they been talking about before she'd arrived at breakfast? And why had Draco sat with them – her and Neville – at breakfast, for so long? He could just have gotten up and left to sit with Crabbe and Goyle, couldn't he?

*Curiouser and curiouser...*

Why had Neville been so friendly to her when she'd arrived? It had been a superficial sort of friendliness when he'd greeted her at first and launched into conversation so quickly, so casually. Then it had, somehow, turned more sincere, realer after she'd kicked up the little scene – she blushed a little when she remembered it, it had been so awfully dramatic and impromptu – after the proverbial thunderbolt had hit her. They'd patched up together again. But it had been a shallow, over-the-surface sort of patch-up. Not a make-up, a patch-up. There was a difference. Varnish the surface a little and ignore the slowly

rotting core underneath. No, no it wasn't rotting; it was alright, just fine, swell really...

*Am I deluding myself?*

She moved onto a sweet little cup dedicated to some Cornelius Fudge. There was a lovely little badger engraved on it – he must have been a Hufflepuff.

*Am I deluding myself?*

She rubbed the cup slowly and carefully, because her hands were very tired now. Smith didn't seem to be drained at all – he was rubbing and polishing as vigorously and angrily as ever. But then again, he hadn't been practicing for two hours.

*Am I deluding myself?*

What was up with Neville? What game was he playing, juggling her and Draco – practically mortal enemies – together, friends with both? It was aggravating and if she hadn't been the sweetest, gentlest most patient soul in the world she would have yelled at him and demanded an explanation. Too bad that you rarely – if ever – got a complete explanation from Neville. He'd hem and he'd haw, he'd crack a joke or quip something quotable, but he would not – unless it was absolutely necessary – give you a straight, clear answer. That wasn't how he worked.

She stared at Smith from sleep-benumbed eyes, almost wistfully. The poor child was probably as straightforward as Neville was complicated. You always knew where you stood with Zacharias Smith. You only knew how you stood with Neville Longbottom if you figured it out yourself. She chuckled softly to herself.

*Well what would you expect? Smith's a Gryffindor for a reason. Neville's a Slytherin for another reason. And you're... you're a Slytherindor, seventy-percent Slytherin, thirty-percent Gryffindor. That's as close as you'll ever get to homogeneity.*

*I can deal with that*, she thought, stifling a yawn and moving on to yet another shield, *After all, nobody's really homogeneous once you get acquainted with them.*

**A/N: It's a little untidy, as a chapter, I know. I'll have to polish it up later, I guess.**

## Words

*“When you’re scared, you don’t huddle up in a corner – you stand and get up and get out there. You think it goes away while you’re letting it control you?”*

## James Potter

*Dearest, unique-st, most bee-yoo-ti-full Godfather,*

*What is the secret to eternal perkiness? I am a woebegone, young mortal, in desperate need of this precious secret. Will you, with your superior wisdom and greater experience of the world, condescend to share it with me? I promise not to drop spiders into your soup at Christmas.*

*Second Year isn’t as delightful as I had visualized it would be when I was but a mere child of eleven. You might have garnered that much from my hints that I am, as of now, a woebegone individual. Woebegone... isn’t it a lovely word? It makes me think of cobwebs and stone castles with enchanted princesses and high walls of thorny roses... oh wait, I’m talking about Sleeping Beauty, right? No, I’m not really woebegone... but since it’s a very pretty word I might as well work it into any sentence, any chance I can get. I mean, seriously, what would the world do if I turned woebegone? They’d either laugh at me or start screaming bloody murder, the world’s ending...*

*But still, I don’t feel very, erm, ‘perky’ now. Flint’s a tyrant, Ron is too much of a Ravenclaw, Neville is even more of a Slytherin, Millicent’s cat hates me – very bad, considering it has sharper claws than me – Pansy knows more German swearwords than me (you know, you COULD send me a good list of swearwords in languages like Italian, Spanish, maybe even Latin though I might not be able to pronounce them), ... and the list goes on and on and on... Whatever. Uncle Moony told you about my detention, didn’t he? I must have set a school record – but it was so worth it. By the way, do I sound like an archetypical, preppy, blond sixteen-year-old? Evan Hill – he’s a Muggleborn – said I sound like his older sister (I’ve seen a photo of her and she’s as blond and preppy-ish as you can get)... is that normal?*



*McGonagall's an old softie at heart – I put up the old, puppy-eyes, I'm-a-wounded-little-girl act, complete with tears and a shaking voice. Haha, it was awesome – now I have only a week's worth of detention instead of a month! Better still, Smith lost his temper, called McGonagall a bloody sod, who practices rampant favoritism, and well... earned himself a week-long detention, fair and square too. He is SUCH a ponce, a git, a brat, a prat, a prick, annoying, stupid, nasty, rude, unpleasant, cranky, cowardly, moronic, demonic, insufferable, insolent, obnoxious...*

*But I'm sure you know all about that, of course. Smith – Zacharias Smith. Doesn't that ring a bell? Yes, I know his parents were brutally murdered – and he had to see it too, ouch – when he was six, but hello, what right does THAT give him to be so unendurable now, hmm? Where's the justice in this world, Uncle Padfoot? Yes, yes I know that Justice is just a figment of my imagination and that the strong are only strong because... blah blah blah until the end of time, whatever, I don't care. There should be justice, because I say so. Isn't that as good reason as any?*

*Yep, I sound like a whiny seven-year-old. I sound like Harry, I sound like Smith, I sound like Draco. Pah, that's why I like girls more, SOMETIMES, nowadays – they never sound like little brats, no matter how bitchy they are. Only boys do that. Sorry if I hurt your delicate feelings – you sound bratty yourself, sometimes. And stop pouting now.*

*But seriously, Smith is... horrible. No other word for it. Guess what he did today. Just guess.*

...

...

...

*Ok, I'll tell you since you seem unable to guess.*

*He made a tray of pastries and a flagon of pumpkin juice burst up into my face today at breakfast. No, seriously he did. And no, I don't have proof. But, heck, who needs PROOF? Who else would have done it?*

*Draco and Pansy have more... finesse and I don't know anyone else who hates me that much. Well, except for Wood, Gryffindor Quidditch Captain. He might have, but I'm more inclined to distrust Smith. Wood hates Flint more than he does me.*

*It sounds funny in a letter, but seriously it was quite dreadful. I sat down between Neville, who was sitting next to Draco, and Blaise at breakfast. There was this enormous, lovely tray of pastries, right in front of me, and this huge flagon of iced pumpkin juice. I was just reaching out to pick up a bun, quite innocently, and then suddenly KAPOOSH! The tray flew into the air, the flagon jumped up with it, and I barely had time to gape up at them before I was drenched, and then covered with bloody cakes – at practically the same time. Just imagine how I felt. Just imagine how I looked*

*...You're laughing, aren't you? How perfectly insulting. Sweet Morgana, it was COLD. And sticky, don't forget sticky. Everyone gaped, and then started laughing, even Draco – everyone except Neville (who was holding back giggles) and Ron, who was gawping at me from the Ravenclaw Table. I spotted Smith leaning next to Parvati Patil's seat, with the Gryffs, and they were simply ROARING with laughter – Smith was actually shaking! Well, Uncle Moony fixed me up in a jiffy, but it was quite insulting to my ego. Of course, I laughed it off later, but I have vowed vengeance against Smith. He is SO going to get it.*

*I think he used one of those Flick-Controlled Insta-Combustors we saw. He might easily have sneaked one under the table at the place where I sit everyday, early in the morning. Of course, I didn't check – and I wouldn't have found anything either, since they burn up three seconds after activation, though I might have found a pile of ash under the table – but well, it's a possibility, isn't it? Ron told me he's a bit of an insomniac and that Smith roams around the castle at night when he can't sleep (usually to the kitchens). Ron knows a lot about Smith because Smith likes him.*

*Yes, yes I know. Oddest couple in the history of time. Luckily, Smith also wants to shag Parvati Patil's bones out, so I don't think he'll make any advances on Ron when I'm around to guard little Ronnikins.*

*Also, he seems to take slurs on his questionable sexual orientation to heart, so it's not like he's going to openly do anything to Ron.*

*We have Herbology with the Gryffindors, you see. We're doing Mandrakes. And um, you do know the names of certain products that incite Mandrakes and cause them to turn terribly violent towards those who try to work on them. And um, being my godfather, you are, of course, willing to aid and abet me in any scheme, which my wicked mind may concoct. That's settled then. I don't care how nice you think Smith is, I am your goddaughter, not him. Your loyalties, therefore, lie with me.*

*...Yes, yes I'm turning into quite the diabolical, stereotypical Slytherin, aren't I? Blaise is even teaching me how to perfect my evil smirk and maniacal laugh.*

*Love,*

*Rose*

*PS: I want my Draught-that-Incites-Mandrakes as soon as possible.*

"But you don't *have* any proof that it was Zacharias Smith," Tracey pointed out reasonably as Rose stormed down the corridor to DADA class, eyes blazing. DADA was just after breakfast, on Wednesday morning. Along with Herbology, it was the only class the Slytherins shared with the Gryffindors. "I mean, it could just as well have been me who did it."

"Don't be silly," Pansy told her, a trifle coldly. She clutched Tracey's arm, her scarlet talons digging into her friend's sleeve. "You would never stoop to that level. I agree with her, only a boy as vile as Smith, would condescend to such a low, nasty trick. However, I won't say that it wasn't entirely undeserved." Smiling unpleasantly, she literally dragged Tracey away.

"Ignore her," Millicent said, under her breath, "Just..."

"Well, I *would*, if my best friend was offering me moral support," Rose hissed, digging her nails into her palms, and scowling as Malfoy and Neville walked together to DADA, slightly behind her. Malfoy was no

longer Draco. He was just Malfoy. Stealing her best friend! The nerve of him! She felt a little lonely. It wasn't nice, having to share Neville with a two-faced, ice-hearted, little toad. It was sharing, what they were doing. Malfoy sat next to Neville at breakfast, though Neville ignored him for the most part and talked to Rose.

He'd developed a pattern, the week he'd been at Hogwarts. Spend a few classes with Malfoy, another few with Rose. Neville would sit in the middle during any class and they – Rose and Malfoy – would sit on either side of him, neither talking to the other, only to Neville. They ignored each other completely. It was an unusual arrangement, but one which Rose had been forced to get used to. There was simply nothing she could do about it. It was either compromise or lose Neville. She was seventy-percent Slytherin, after all. A compromise was infinitely more preferable.

Rose petulantly flung herself into DADA class and dropped down gracelessly next to Blaise. "Move," she told him sulkily, scowling as Neville and Malfoy entered the class, grinning. Blaise was a fun person to sit down next to, when Neville and Ron weren't available. He was better looking than both of them combined; he cracked amusing (if malicious) jokes and slurs at the expense of half the class, and treated her like a real girl fifteen percent of the time. Most of the other boys treated her like a girl two percent of the time. The change was rather pleasant.

Blaise wagged his eyebrows at her. "Angry?"

"Furious," she told him curtly. "Oh god, I don't have *time* for that fool," she hissed impatiently as Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown arrived, arm-in-arm.

"Lockhart?" Blaise said, reading her mind.

"Yes," Rose sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Seriously, I could be better off playing Quidditch..."

"In this cold?" he demanded, looking horrified. "Are you..."

“Out of my mind?” she sighed, “Yeah, deal with it.” She propped her cheek on her palm and tapped her fingers on the desk restlessly, “I bet *he’ll* be wearing magenta today.”

“Nay – he once told me that it didn’t suit his complexion and that he preferred teal,” Blaise said, “Though he didn’t recommend teal for me. He actually suggested I wear scarlet. Of course, it’s a *Gryffindor* color but I tried it out yesterday and I must say, I looked even more dashing than ever – he does give out good fashion advice, Rose. You really should ask him for his opinion on your wardrobe – you’re simply a fashion disaster. No sense of color coordination or suitable silhouette at all.”

“Well, I’m not a... sissy!” Rose hissed as Lockhart bounced jovially in, resplendent in flowing teal robes. “What do I care about fashion? It’s only ponces like you...”

“Let’s not get down to name-calling,” Blaise said, examining his immaculate hands after throwing her a disdainful look. “Oh look, Rose – Smith’s grinning at you.”

“The *nerve* of him...”

“Indeed,” Blaise said dryly, “I’d be quaking in terror if I were him. He’s got plenty of nerve to face down *your* Stare of Doom.”

“Page 31, *Travels with Trolls*, please. Now I will demonstrate to you how I caught the Wicked Troll of the West in what I might modestly call one of the most innovative traps invented since Merlin... ah, Miss Potter?”

Rose had been staring at him, revolted. She didn’t like Lockhart. In his own way, he was as annoying as Smith. Hastily, she rearranged her features into a sweeter expression. “Oh nothing, sir,” she trilled, mockery coloring her voice. “I’m just... amazed by your innovative-ness, as always. You’re so brilliant, it’s really a wonder.”

Lockart smiled fondly at her. “Yes, it is, isn’t it?” he asked complacently. “But now, let me enunciate this wonderful passage, which I will not hesitate to name as the most exquisite, expressive...”

“He. Is. So. Full. Of. Himself,” Rose muttered to Blaise, scowling and pulling out *Travels with Trolls*. “If his head was any bigger he wouldn’t fit through the door, I swear.”

“He gives out good fashion advice,” Blaise told her seriously. “Who cares how thick he is?”

“Superficial, much?” Rose asked crossly. “Ouch!” she yelped suddenly as something hit her forehead. “Nothing, professor,” she said quickly when Lockhart looked at her. It was a paper airplane with a very pointy tip, which, after hitting her head, had fallen down to her lap. She unfolded the airplane, grimacing, and smoothed it out.

**Coward. Why don’t you tell Lockhart what you think of him, instead of batting your eyelashes at him?**

Rose glanced up and caught Smith staring at her, leering in a most objectionable fashion from the other side of the classroom. He was sitting alone as usual.

*Prick.* Rose folded up the paper into an airplane and after a quick glance at Lockhart hurled it viciously at Smith. He ducked before it hit him, quickly smoothed it out and grinned tauntingly at her after reading it. Rose folded her arms on her chest and stuck out her tongue at him.

“You’re being your usual mature self, I see,” Blaise informed her dryly. “Honestly, Potter – what kind of an insult is *prick*? Three-year-olds use it when they feel particularly unimaginative.”

“Three-year-olds can’t *write*,” Rose said sullenly, catching the airplane Smith threw at her. “And stop reading my mail.”

“Since when have *you* set up a correspondence with Zacharias Smith?”

“Go to hell,” Rose muttered, “Gawp at Lisa Turpin. Flutter your eyelashes at Lockhart.”

**You need a crash course in anger management.**

*You're a loathsome retard.*

**You sleep with Flint. No wonder he still hasn't kicked you off the Quidditch team.**

*How on earth did you guess my dirty, little secret? Actually, I sleep with every single guy on the Quidditch team.*

**Good – you actually admit it! I'm so proud of you.**

*Trust a Gryffindor to be crass every chance he gets.*

**Your parents were Gryffindors.**

*And your point is...?*

**Why aren't you sitting with your *best friend***

*At least I'm sitting with someone. Unlike someone who can never get anyone to sit next to him, no matter how much he bribes them.*

**Zabini sits with anything with breasts. Not that yours are very prominent.**

*At least I'm not a pathetic weakling who can't beat up a scrawny, little girl.*

**Scrawny, little girl? Hellion would be more appropriate.**

*You're more Slytherin than I ever would have guessed. That was a sneaky way of getting revenge. Admit you used a Flick-Controlled Insta-Combustor.*

**I have no idea of what you're getting at. I'm perfectly innocent. It's your own fault you make enemies as soon as you open your fat mouth.**

*Ever heard about glass houses? Who's the coward now? Too scared to confess?*

**Prudence is the better part of valor. Or something like that.**

*Coward. Coward. Coward.*

**Slytherin broomstick.**

*I'm nothing compared to your pretty little Parvati.*

Rose was bored now. Smith had apparently taken her comment about Parvati to heart and had stopped whacking her with paper airplanes. Blaise was sound asleep, his head buried under his arms. No amount of shaking, kicking, or hissing in his ear could wake him up. She was forced to listen to Lockhart drone on and on about his brilliance, while the rest of the class yawned and stared at him, misty-eyed. Only Hermione Granger and a few other gormless girls gazed up at him, rapt-eyed, with dreamy smiles. She couldn't stand this. She *wouldn't* stand it. No, she would not. And if she didn't want to, why should she? She was Rose Potter. Charisma was her imaginary middle name. And Lockhart was going to get a blast of it.

She fumbled in her bag for her little kit of Potions essentials and found the small, sharp, silver knife she used for fine-cutting. Viciously, she stabbed it into her palm. Blood trickled down the punctured skin and her yelp of pain was very genuine.

"Please, Professor," she whimpered, staring at Lockhart through wide, appealing eyes as he turned towards her. "My stomach hurts so *much* and..." She batted her long eyelashes at him, pouting slightly, and real tears glimmering on her emerald-green eyes. Her palm *did* hurt. "I do so want to hear you read... but," she sighed dramatically, looking down and fluttering her lashes very rapidly, "Oh, I do think I need the Hospital Wing... it's so *horrible*..." Blaise had finally woken up and now he was blinking dazedly up at her, cheek resting on palm.

"Yes, yes," Lockhart said sympathetically, as the rest of the class gaped at her, incredulous, envious, and impressed. "Off to Madam Pomfrey you go, Miss Potter. No need to worry, I'll read out this splendid passage for you later if you will just visit me – yes, yes my dear, off you go now."

"Thank you!" she breathed, smiling dazzlingly at him. She jumped to her feet and swung out of the classroom, fighting off laughter. When she was at the threshold, she twirled around suddenly and blew an



air-kiss to the rest of the class, smirking. *If you're going to bunk class you might as well do it in style.* Then she marched out, biting her lips hard to keep back the laughter.

Only when she was safely out of earshot did she fling herself against a wall, laughing convulsively. When she was done, she quickly healed her palm, rubbed the blood on the edge of her skirt, and walked outside. It was a cold day, but it was very beautiful. Autumn was in the crisp air – the rustling golden leaves, the cloudless azure sky, and the glassy lake dimpled with graceful ripples. She sat down under a tree facing the lake and pulled the diary out of her bag. Her fingers were simply itching to write in it. She'd more or less ignored it the past week – she hadn't had time to write in it – but now...

*September 10, 1992*

*Screw Neville. He's messing with my head. I know, I know, it sounds like we're, er, dating and he's playing mind-games with me, but really it isn't half so simple. You always have a way out when you're dating – even if it's a bad way out. You don't have that when it concerns your best friend. So, as I said, screw Neville. Not very creative, am I? Never mind that – I want your advice today. So you're allowed to speak – or write – to me. But only for today.*

*It's like Neville's... juggling me and DM (let's call Malfoy that). Yeah, juggling – that's what it is. Picture a juggler juggling two balls, dropping neither, eyes on both, deft-fingered, mysterious-ish. He spends a class talking to me, another to DM, and so on. When he's talking to me, he ignores DM and vice-versa. Get it? He's 'normal' with everyone else – like when he's talking to Colin Creevey he doesn't ignore me and so on. Of course, DM just ups and leaves when he's talking to CC – Muggleborn – or Ron.*

*But why? Why this... duality? Why can't he just tell DM right out that he's a prat and break it off? Or else, why can't he tell me that I'm a prick and break it off with me? And why does His Royal Highness, King-of-Assheaded-Opinions, Draco Aquilius Malfoy stick with Neville? Why can't he leave my friends alone*

*Ok, that's a lot of why-s. I need answers now. And who's going to supply them, hmm? Riddle me that.*

...

...

...

*Well? SPEAK UP!!*

**Perhaps your friend, Neville, would be willing to answer your queries? I am merely a humble diary – how would I know?**

*You're a talking diary. You ought to know. And for your information, asking Neville Longbottom is like trying to guess the password to a Gringotts vault. Of course, you can keep on guessing the password for all eternity and you just might hit the correct password in this century, but... it's not very likely. The odds are stacked high against you.*

**Your parents? Any other good friends of young Mr Longbottom?**

*I'm his best friend. I know more about him than anyone else – his Gran, Ron, and sometimes even himself. And as for telling my parents... um, hello? This is the twentieth century! I don't care what year you were manufactured in, but nowadays, we just don't... do that. Well, yeah we do – but only in case of dire emergencies. Like when you're afraid your friend is being possessed by I don't know... maybe You-Know-Who?*

**You-Know-Who?**

*OK, what century were you manufactured in?! How can you NOT know who You-Know-Who is... oh, wait a minute, you're not a person. Heh, sorry. I guess even talking diaries have their limits, don't they? Even though you do know the spelling of rheoterical...*

**Rhetorical. You misspelled it once again.**

*Yeah... do you have an embedded dictionary?*

**Indeed. Along with a thesaurus, a translator, a calculator, and endless data-storage capacity...**

*Sure. Do you want to know who You-Know-Who is?*

**Dying to.**

*Lord Voldemort.*

...

...

...

*OH MY GOD!! I JUST SPELT HIS NAME!! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT...*

*It feels like... sacrilege. Well, not in the holy sense but in the, erm, scary sense. Get what I mean? I can't believe I wrote that down – Ron wouldn't have been brave enough to.*

**Neville?**

*Yes. He's very brave when he's... provoked. I dared him to say You-Know-Who's name when we were six – I thought he'd be too scared to say it, because most people are – but he just threw me a Look and said it. Neville's a condrum.*

**Do you mean conundrum?**

*Oh yeah, I think I do. Uncle Padfoot loved using that word when I was eight. He loves long words, and so do I, sometimes. But I do tend to misspell them when they're too long. Harry does that all the time. He's only seven but he's already read the Chronicles of Narnia! I only read them when I was nine, and then I was so bored within fifty pages that I threw it out of the window. Mum was awfully mad – it was one of her favorite books when she was a little girl. Daddy just laughed.*

**You are not bookish?**

*No, not really. I'm more athlete-y. But I love books on mythology – I adore them.*

**Are you well versed in Greek mythology?**

*Extraordinarily well.*

**The mother of Hypnos...**

*Nyx.*

**Hestia disapproved of the actions of the Goddess...**

*Aphrodite.*

**Aphrodite was born of...**

*Sea-Foam.*

**The son of Hephaestus and Athena...**

*Erichthonius.*

**Superb.**

*I told you I was good at it. I think I misjudged you though – you're OK to talk to. Or write to.*

**Thank you for the compliment. By the way, about your earlier comments on Neville Longbottom – perhaps I would be in a better position to give you an answer about the boy's motives, if I had a detailed analysis of his character.**

*Analysis? What do you want to know about him?*

**It would be more convenient if I were permitted to... converse with him.**

*You want to write to Neville?*

**Indeed.**

*Hell, no. How are you going to do that? I can't just hand you over to him and ask him to please, please write in you, and then take you back when I feel like it. That's... ridiculous.*

**Why?**

*You're just not 20th century material, you know.*

**Perhaps, not later 20th century. Earlier, certainly. I was created in 1945.**

*Really? How? When? Why? Where?*

**Perhaps this is a tale for another time. Isn't that your bell ringing?**

*Oh yeah... drat it, we have Potions. Bye now. I'll talk to you later.*

**000**

*September 12, 1992*

*Hey there! I've been busy, but I've been thinking of your "idea" of handing you over to Neville. You know, it's so cuckoo-headed it just might work. Cuckoo-headed ideas work most of the time.*

**How do you know?**

*Personal experience. The Quirrell Affair in June and the Car Accident, when I was seven, taught me that.*

**Car? You are Muggle-born?**

*No, my mother is though. Why?*

**How did you manage to involve yourself in a Car Accident?**

*The same way I managed to involve myself into You-Know-Who's schemes – bull-headed curiosity. I'm too impulsive for my own good.*

**I don't quite understand...**

*Of course, you don't. Did you expect to?*

**It might simplify matters. At the moment, I am rather confused.**

*Oh, well...I suppose it won't hurt to explain matters. Not now though, I've got tons of homework. Transfiguration especially. McGonagall*

*threatened to give me detention if I didn't finish my work again – but it's just too hard! Say... since DM won't, can you give me help with that?*

**Certainly.**

*WHAT?! You're a... diary. I was joking – you can't help me! I'm in second year.*

**My former owner scored Triple A's in his Transfiguration N.E.W.T's.**

*AAA? What's that supposed to mean? I thought there were only O, E, A, P and T grades.*

**You mean the O.W.Ls. The N.E.W.Ts go by a different system altogether – quite complex, really. The grading depends upon which subject is being taken – AAA in Transfiguration means 110 percent.**

*Oh, wow. Hermione Granger got over 100 percent in Charms last year. But you didn't score Triple AAAs – your owner did. So, basically, you don't know a thing about Transfiguration.*

**He copied his notes in me. As I have mentioned before, I have infinite data storage capacity.**

*Oh, well, I suppose it won't hurt to give you a try. Wait a minute and let me get my things.*

**000**

*Most cherished and diabolical goddaughter,*

*Coffee laced with Firewhiskey, one-night stands, several pounds of sugar, and dancing in the freezing rain... those, my dear child, will guide you on your quest to seek eternal perkiness. By the way, please deliver my congratulations to young Mr. Smith. Don't take it the wrong way, Rose, I truly am sorry about your misfortune – no, I'm not sniggering at you while I'm writing this, well, maybe a little, but not much (did Neville take any photos of the memorable occasion?*

*Something that your father might perhaps use to chase off any unsanctioned wooers for your hand?)*

*He seemed like a nice, little boy when I saw him at Porcia's house. Now, however, he seems much nicer than before. However, as your godfather, I am honor-bound to serve you in whatsoever way you desire. Erm, that came out fairly perverted, didn't it? Never mind, you know what I mean. I got you a packet of Mørkdrømmen dust – it comes from the roots of a Norwegian plant, and, I'm sure, Neville knows more about it than I ever will. Dip half-a-tablespoon's worth of it into ten milliliters of salamander blood, stir well, and then drop the mixture into the required pot of Mandrakes. It works like magic. But do remember not to use more than half-a-tablespoon's worth, the consequences won't be so pleasant then. And don't use the mixture more than once every two weeks.*

*Oh, I am so sure second year is much, much harder than being a Level 9 Unspeakable, caught smack in the middle of one of the biggest murder cases post-War. My voice, my dear, is dripping with sarcasm, by the way. The workload on us has dipped a bit – now the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the Aurors are shouldering most of it, though. But still, I'm too busy for a girlfriend. Laugh and marvel at this nugget of information – Sirius Pollux Black is single for the first time in seventeen years!*

*Of course, my current position has, to put it mildly, bewildered many. Your mother is highly distressed and wants to know whether I am coming down with something. Your father thinks I did it for a bet (at my age!). Even young Harry is disappointed. "But Melissa was so pretty!" he told me reproachfully, when I informed him that I had ditched Melissa, just like Cherie, Emily, Kat... "I like looking at your girlfriends – they're all so pretty! You're not very nice to just dump them, Uncle Padfoot."*

*Seriously. Being talked down to by a seven-year-old is simply unfair. Snidget likes eating rings, did you know? She swallowed your mother's little emerald engagement ring, yesterday. Pandemonium naturally ensued (Lily causing most of it). Your mother is still pretty hysterical – even though Snidget seems to be fine now – and has vowed to lock up all her rings for the next five years.*

*I told Porcia about how I got rid of Melissa – by kissing a waitress in front of her, it saves time even though it creates a big fuss. She laughed and laughed. She looks like she could do with some laughs – she’s even busier than me, at the moment. Porcia Ramsey, doesn’t that ring a bell, Rose?*

*“I was in third year when you lot were in seventh,” she confessed to me after I told her about the Dumping of Melissa. “I had this... huge, enormous crush on all four of you. Well, of course, the whole school did, really. Someone once told me that you loved Honey Needles and I spent my whole allowance buying them and mailing you anonymous letters with them. Do you remember them?”*

*How could I forget? Honey Needles are bliss. One does not easily forget a year when whole packages of them used to arrive for one, via anonymous letters.*

*“And I simply hated Lily,” she grinned. “Then one day she stopped my cousin Ganymede from bashing me up – and I started worshipping her from that day. I never dreamed that I’d be working with you.”*

*“And,” I asked her excitedly, preening a little, “do you still have a crush on me?”*

*She cast me an appraising look, shook her head, and smiled. “No,” she said calmly, “I like Aidan Lynch much better. Not that you aren’t still handsome, but you’re not my type now, sorry.”*

*Ouch! What is it with girls and Aidan Lynch, hmm? Is he that much hotter than me? Excuse me, I have prettier hair and a better smile! Who cares about figures – Rose, am I fat, by the way? Is that why everyone likes Lynch better than me? I can’t ask anyone except you – Lily would tell James and James would laugh at me. Please, please tell me what you think about my figure!*

*Love,*

*Uncle Padfoot*

*PS: Don’t mention Lockhart to your mother. She’s as wild about him as she was in school. It’s not pleasant, having to hear her rave about*



*how dashing he is – it damages both my and your father's egos. You could always give her his autograph as a Christmas gift, though.*

**000**

*September 16, 1992*

*I love the world! Smith's Mandrakes almost managed to strangle him – pity about the 'almost' – and nobody ever suspected me! Even he didn't – he never even thought about Mørkdrømmen dust, the silly fool! And thanks for all the help you gave me – McGonagall didn't even mention detention in class, today! And Quidditch's going splendidly – even with DM on the team.*

*Lee Jordan is leaving the Gryffindor Quidditch Team – he used to be Seeker. He's going to commentate now. Lord help us – he's going to blacken the Slytherin team to the best of his ability. I wish I knew who his replacement is, but the Gryffs are keeping it very hush-hush. Of course, we'll find out eventually, but in the meanwhile... well, all we can do is guess. It could be anyone from Second to Seventh year – if it was a First Year there would have been a great hullabaloo and we'd know in a jiffy. Never mind, I'm better than anyone else. I'm going to win the Quidditch World Cup for my team someday, you bet on it.*

**Fascinating.**

*I really am good, you know. It's not arrogance, really it isn't.*

**Indeed.**

*Sarcastic, much? Never mind, since you've been such a good, little diary, I'm going to tell you the stories about the Quirrell Affair and the Car Accident. Be warned though, my handwriting's going to be sloppy. My right hand is exhausted, so I'll write with my left. I'm kind-of ambidextrous, but I write worse with my left hand. Of course, it'll improve with practice – I've only been writing with my left hand for a year, and that too, not very often.*

**How unusual...**

*Yes. See how clumsy my letters are – but at least my right hand feels better. It's very useful, being ambidextrous. I read that the new Seeker the Стъкло Лешояд have hired, Viktor Krum, (he's only 16 – fancy that!) is ambidextrous. He's gotten very good reviews after his first match, though he isn't much to look at.*

### **The story...**

*Oh yes, of course. I'm a rambler, aren't I? So are Mum and Uncle Padfoot. Ron and Daddy aren't – they're strictly no-ramble. No-ramblers are usually awfully nice. Well, I'll stop rambling now...*

**A/N: 987 reviews – OMG, squeals!! I can't believe it, thank you, thank you, thank you SO MUCH – all of you!! I can't believe I'm so close to 1000 – lots of love, everyone!**

## ***The Attack of the Killer Frogs***

*Sometimes no one around you understands that life isn't in black and white. Sometimes you have to live in the gray, and sometimes you can't help but stray into the dark. When you find someone who understands that, you have to hold on no matter what.*

## ***Somebody's signature***

*My one true love,*

*I'm sure Miss Ramsey's comments are giving you sleepless nights. You poor, dear, little doggie – what did you expect? You're not exactly getting any younger – I mean, you're hitting 33 this November. It's been a long time since you've been the heartthrob of Hogwarts, so my advice to you is: GET USED TO IT. Or else get into better shape. No, I am not making fun of your figure – you're in much better shape than Daddy, I'll admit, or actually, even Mum – but, well, it's not long before you reach the middle-aged spread, so be prepared for it.*

*... That does not mean you are allowed to starve yourself to death. Just exercise, like me. I am a wonderful exerciser, do you know? Of course, I'm not the one who initiated my oh-so-magnificent exercise routine (Flint did), but still, it truly is glorious – in a masochistic way. Flint wants us all to keep in shape – and really, everyone else on the team, excepting my superb self of course, needs all the exercise they can get. So, Saturday and Sunday mornings find me running three laps around the pitch – it's like sleep-running, actually – at five in the morning, grumpily and loudly bemoaning the lack of strong coffee. Inevitably, push-ups – yes, shudder at the thought of that – follow, along with other diabolical forms of torture that require us to bend and twist our bodies in implausible shapes.*

*It is terribly painful and, of course, I feel like gutting Flint but unfortunately, he is almost seven feet tall, weighs ten times as much as me, and is too nice to gut most of the time. He's very older-brotherly, and that is exceedingly annoying. You can't gut someone who's so sweet to you all the time – except, of course, when he's shouting at you to run faster, when you've already reached top-speed, and when your lungs are all but bursting open.*

*I hate dawn air. It stinks of mildew and makes me sneeze and, I swear, the birds laugh at me. Yes, they do – I wasn't imagining it, they were actually SNIGGERING at me! Evil birdies. I'm going to poison them, someday. That'll show them – them and their twitter-pitter that sounds like sniggers...*

*Well, back to the main topic: Sirius Black vs. Aidan Lynch. Uncle Padfoot, Aidan Lynch is God. You are only mortal. Get used to that. Mortal vs. God. Who wins? Not that you're not a very dashing mortal of course – I'm sure any number of women would assure you of that fact... but, do you have that exquisitely bronzy-golden skin, those dreamy eyes like starry twilight skies, those thick, unendurably, excruciatingly loooooooooooooong lashes, the rich, honey-gold curls so like a Greek god's, that inscrutable smile – tinged with a hint of mischief, those magnificent legs, that slender waist, that lean, yet not too-lean-but-muscled-also frame, the grace, the kissable little nose, those delicate fingers...?*

*No, you do not. Get used to it and don't cry like Snidget.*

*Not that you don't have your good points as well (and I hardly need to enumerate them). You're just... getting on in years. Haha, poor you.*

*Thanks for the dust – I slipped in the concoction during Herbology on Tuesday. Smith's Mandrakes tried to strangle him – a pity they didn't succeed! He was staring at Parvati across the room and he didn't even notice the Mandrake vines creeping closer and closer towards his throat until Dean Thomas, suddenly, asked him, "Um, Zacharias – anything wrong?"*

*He turned around, saw the vines just inches from his neck, and screamed like a little sissy. That did it – they went completely wild and within a trice were entangled around his throat, choking him! He turned red, then blue, and then almost black until Sprout yelled a spell and the vines burned up. They left scorch marks on his neck, but unfortunately, she wiped them away too, with her wand. Still, his face was simply priceless – and the way he took on, afterwards! Narky, little pest – you'd think he'd never been that close to death before!*

*Oh wait, he hadn't. See what I told you about him being a sissy?*

*I'm not very woebegone now, more like wary. Smith didn't suspect me, of course, but well, he doesn't need a reason to try to kill me, does he? He has anger management issues, you see. When is the trial taking place, by the way? Ron said a definite date hasn't been fixed yet, but do you have any extra information?*

XOXOXOXOXO

Rose

"Where are you going, Uncle Moony?"

Remus Lupin turned around and smiled at Rose Potter. "I might ask you the same question. It's six o'clock and it's Sunday. You ought to be in bed right now, dreaming about breakfast."

Rose shrugged and wrapped her long, rainbow-colored, woolen scarf more closely around her. "Flint's in the Hospital Wing," she elaborated. "Wood broke his arm yesterday. We won't be having Quidditch practice today morning, I just found out, but I don't think I can get back to bed right now." She grimaced, "Bad habits die hard, you see."

"Rising early is hardly considered a bad habit," Remus told her. "Though, your godfather might be of the same opinion as you."

"It's not an indoor-sy day," Rose told, tugging at a strand of her hair. "Do you get what I mean? I feel like running and leaping and shouting – I think I'm in a jumpy mood."

"Restive would be a more appropriate term," Remus smiled. "I'm going down to Hagrid's to discuss the unicorns in the Forest – I'm quite keen on showing my fourth-years live specimens. Hagrid might be able to procure them for me. Would you like to come?"

Rose frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know," she said, a bit cautiously. "I've heard he gets drunk every other night and sets fire to his bed."

Remus blinked bemusedly down at her for a few seconds before suddenly roaring with laughter. He bent over nearly double from convulsions of laughter, tears brimming at the corners of his eyes,

one arm clutching his lower belly as though to keep it from splitting with laughter. Rose slapped him on the back, a little annoyed that he'd found her so amusing. She didn't like people finding her funny when she had no intention of being funny.

"I don't see what's so funny," she said, a little stiffly, after Uncle Moony regained some small measure of self-control and leaned against a stone pillar, sipping a glass of water.

Uncle Moony beamed down at her, his golden-brown eyes twinkling mischievously. "You," he said frankly, "sound exactly like Narcissa Black."

"*Narcissa Black?*" Rose repeated bewildered. "Do you mean Draco's mother?" She hunted through her memory for everything she ever heard about the woman. *Draco's mother... Uncle Padfoot's, er, cousin... maybe the pretty, blond lady at his mum's funeral... er, what else...?* Her mind drew a complete blank.

"Oh, yes," Uncle Moony chuckled reminiscently. "Your Uncle Padfoot's elder cousin, Cissy Black – the belle of the school in her day, she cut quite a swathe through the boys... naturally, her lovely, long hair and that snooty voice her admirers found so endearing both presented ideal targets for some of our more rambunctious pranks. Can it be that your earlier observations on Hagrid were inspired by young Master Malfoy?"

Rose wrinkled her nose thoughtfully and then grinned. "Yeah... come to think of it, Draco was the one who told me and Neville that, last year." She chuckled, "Like mother, like son, eh?"

Uncle Moony smiled and took her arm. "He's a very nice man," he told her, walking out into the chilly autumn morning. "Kind, generous, very brave, and a heart of gold even if he doesn't measure up to Madam's standards – after all those are the things that matter, aren't they? He was always quite tolerant of our antics, and Sirius was the one who rescued Fang in our seventh year and brought him to Hagrid. Haven't you seen that large, black boarhound of his?"

"Mmm... yes," Rose nodded thoughtfully. "Daphne and Pansy are always moaning about how Hagrid lets him run free all over the

grounds – they’re terrified of huge dogs. So is Dr-, er, I mean Malfoy, even though he won’t admit it.”

“He *is* intimidating,” Uncle Moony admitted. “But he really was a sweet, shy, little puppy when we found him on our escapades into the Forest, an odd fifteen years ago. Yes, I know, that’s very old for a dog – he’d be over seventy now if he were human, but remember we *did* find him, a poor, motherless, little runt, in the Forest... Lord only knows what went into the making of him and what’s in his blood.”

Rose giggled as she thought about that. They were passing the greenhouses now, the glass walls translucent so she could see the exotic plants slumbering within. Neville loved plants and anything to do with gardening, really. No wonder he was top of the year at Herbology and Sprout’s pet. “Say,” she began, as they walked down the grounds, beyond Greenhouse Thirteen where she’d often seen the seventh-year N.E.W.T students working. “Do you have any idea who the Gryffindors’ new Seeker is? They have the pitch *privately* booked on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Sundays, so none of us have found out yet.”

“And what makes you think I would know if three Houses haven’t found out yet?” Uncle Moony asked, eyes twinkling. “Me, a poor, humble Care of Magical Creatures’ professor, do you really think I stand a chance against you intimidating children? And that’s not to mention those ferocious beasts you call sixth and seventh years... really, it was quite unkind of Dumbledore to sic them on unfortunate, unsuspecting, little me.”

“I’ll be sure to bring up a word with him,” Rose told him dryly, as they passed the stadium and reached the broomshed where the school brooms – and some personal brooms – were lodged. “As you know, my word carries... what the hell?”

In a flash, she’d sprinted the three hundred meters that separated the broom-shed and the Slytherin Changing Rooms at one corner of the stadium, and grabbed the scruffy, blond boy sneaking out of them, by the back of his collar. Seeing as he was taller than her, it would be more appropriate to say that she launched herself at him and then

clung like an obstinate terrier to the back of his collar, one leg dangling in the air, the other suspended solidly on the ground.

“Thief!” she roared into his ear, holding onto him firmly as he struggled against her. “Imbecile! Cow! B-... ayyyyyyyyh.” She let out a startled scream as he finally broke free of her hold and in one quick, sharp gesture flung her to the cold earth, before dashing away to freedom as fast as his lanky legs could carry him, running too fast for a backwards glance.

“Rose! Rose – are you alright? There now, take my hand, that’s a good girl; yes, now, come on, and up!” Uncle Moony was talking very fast, as he half-dragged her up and straightened her disheveled hair. Grimacing, Rose dusted herself off, eyes blazing in fury.

“That accursed toad!” she spat when Uncle Moony had deemed her hair neat enough and pulled back. “That slobbering Flobberworm! That – that...!” She let out a feral scream that might just have reached him, far away from her though he was. Uncle Moony hastily backed away from her and held up his palms in a conciliatory gesture.

“I can’t believe it!” she exploded again, stamping her feet on the hard ground furiously and waving her hands wildly. “The *nerve* of that *child*...” She fumed for a moment, sucking in air sharply through her mouth and stomping around.

Uncle Moony finally interrupted her livid ruminations with a delicate, “So, that young man wasn’t a member of the Slytherin Quidditch Team, I gather?”

“Hardly,” Rose snorted, “Oh no, that f-...” She cast a sidelong glance at Remus from underneath her lashes and seemed to think better of it. “That was Zacharias Smith,” she finished, a prim expression on her face. “Remember? And I bet my Nimbus, he’s been wrecking havoc in the Changing Rooms... drat him, how’d he get the keys? *Alohomora* wouldn’t work on the doors, would it?” she asked Uncle Moony, worriedly.

He shook his head, but said, quite calmly, “There are other ways of breaking into forbidden rooms, though – a reasonably intelligent and determined twelve-year-old would have been able to take advantage



of them. To be sure, a reasonably moral twelve-year-old *wouldn't* have taken advantage of them, but that's not the question here. Let's go and assess the damage, shall we?"

"I'm telling McGonagall," Rose grumbled, stomping into the Changing Rooms after she unlocked it with the key still in her pocket. All the Quidditch players had keys to their respective Changing Rooms and Rose had been carrying hers since she'd woken up because she'd been expecting practice that morning. "He so deserves a hundred years of detention for this blasphemous invasion... coming, Uncle Moony?" She turned around and looked at Remus who was studying the doors to the Changing Rooms, a bemused expression on his face. "Is anything wrong?"

He looked at her, brow wrinkling in confusion. "The lock isn't burnt or rusted; it doesn't appear to have been bludgeoned open either or sliced in any way... it looks quite intact in all ways too."

"He was sneaking *out* of the Changing Rooms," Rose reminded him. "I'm sure he would have cleaned up any mess he'd made earlier."

But Uncle Moony was shaking his head. "He wouldn't have needed to," he said patiently, "There would have been no evidence against him – why waste valuable time in which he might be sighted fixing up the lock? Unless, of course, he is an unusually well-organized young man and likes things to be properly in order."

"He isn't," Rose said. "I mean, I don't know – but he doesn't seem the type. He's more of a... er, thug. I doubt cleaning up is his specialty."

"Ingenious child, then," Uncle Moony muttered, shaking his head slightly as though to clear it. "The lock looks pristine – he must have resorted to more complex spells than *Incendio* or..." He began listing the spells Smith might have used as Rose opened cupboards, peeked under benches, and searched in crannies and nooks for any sign of damage. Everything looked fine.

Slightly suspicious, she unlocked her private cubicle – she'd been given one last year being the only girl on the Slytherin team. It was more of a little room really, with its own window. Today sunlight streamed in through the tightly locked window, illuminating the clean,

but sparsely furnished small room. Rose unlocked the window and breathed in the cool morning air. It smelt like mildew, but other than that it was quite pleasant. Then she headed for one of the lower cupboards and opened it.

If she'd been the impressionable, feebly-witted sort she would instantly have run screaming from the room and never have looked back. Thankfully, she was not and the only thing she did was mutter, "Oh bloody hell," before vaulting out of the room through the window in a single, inelegant, but swift, bound.

"Uncle Moony – we're under attack by frogs!" she yelled and a split second later, her ears were stung by a few oaths and the sounds of a tall man fleeing as far as he could from the Slytherin Changing Rooms, leaves crackling noisily underneath his large footsteps, and curses floating through the air. Rose herself gazed down at the bouncing, burping, bumbling frogs in distaste and anger. How had Smith fit so many of them in one cupboard? Were there more? Thank God, she wasn't *afraid* of frogs! Yes, they were quite loathsome and it was disgusting, having so many of them shoved out at you when you opened a cupboard, but... well, she'd had presence of mind enough to jump out of the window and not be mauled to death by a horde of dirty, pugnacious frogs!

She shivered as she watched them hop by; calling Smith the worst names she could in her mind. She was going to tell McGonagall, oh yes, she was. Maybe she could use her wiles and make McGonagall owl Smith's guardians and tell them about the conduct of their ward – that would sort him out! She grimaced as she watched the last of the frogs *ribbet* away and then stalked out, searching for Uncle Moony. She was too angry to visit Hagrid now; she'd visit him later. Now, the important thing was to have breakfast and find McGonagall as soon as mortally possible.

She found Uncle Moony as far as could be from the Slytherin Changing Rooms, sitting in a tree, paralyzed revulsion still in his face. "How's the view up there?" she drawled up to him, grinning. "Don't worry, Uncle Moony, we've seen the last of them. Though, maybe, I should open all the cupboards and check again, just in case... or I should probably get someone to do that for me."

"I hate frogs," Uncle Moony said in a strangled voice. "They're..." He shuddered, looking slightly sick.

"Yeah," Rose smiled, "I know. I know. Come on down – there's nothing to worry about now."

Uncle Moony shook his head and climbed down, dusting himself off when he reached the ground. "That boy is..."

"Repulsive? Vindictive? Cowardly?" Rose suggested.

"Twelve years old," Uncle Moony said finally. "Just, twelve years old. Just be glad that he isn't sixteen."

Rose shook her head in confusion and told him about her plan to get breakfast. "Want to come?"

"No, thank you," he said, looking slightly nauseous. "Food after such an incident..." He shivered and shook his head. "Thank you, but no."

"Have fun at Hagrid's," she smiled and waved at him before leaving. Rose flicked her hair from her face, buried her hands into her jeans pockets, and walked forth. She'd be damned if McGonagall didn't come to hear of this. What was Smith's problem? Hadn't he already gotten even with her – after the pastry-and-juice incident? Today's Frog Attack just proved that he was a cruel, vindictive, repulsive, little toe-rag. She didn't care that he'd seen his parents get murdered when he was a little boy – so had Ron, so had Susan Bones. And hey, *they* weren't dysfunctional lobsters. *What was Smith's problem?*

Rubbing her fingers against the insides of her pockets, she marched into the school, too busy being angry to notice the gangly boy leaning against the pillars, half-hidden in shadow, eating a piece of cake. She would have marched past him without looking if he hadn't, suddenly, shot forwards and grabbed her arm, pulling her against the pillar next to him.

"What the..." she demanded, but Smith quickly crammed the last piece of cake into his mouth and said, thickly, between bites of cake, "I'm sorry."

“You little...” she was about to begin her tirade, but, with supreme effort, Smith swallowed, grabbed her wrists, and dropped to his knees in front of her.

“Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysor  
rrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorry...”

She freed her wrists and glared down at him. “You think I’ll forgive you just like that? Well, then, you’ve got another thought coming onto you, buddy –”

Smith licked the cake-crumbs off his face. "I'll do anything for you!" he said, sounding a little desperate now. "Honest, I will – just don't tell McGonagall!" He looked up at her appealingly, his heart in his words, his soul in his face.

Rose glanced down at his face and her resentment vanished. She felt like smiling, but bit her smile back hastily. The poor cow. Didn't he know *anything* about manipulation? Well, what the heck – no wonder he wasn't in Slytherin. Timing was everything. She'd have this inexperienced cub in the palm of her hand before long. "Well, I don't know," she murmured, rubbing her wrists, and casting a sidelong glance at him from underneath her lashes. She made sure her face was hard and resolute, but that the barest trace of indecisiveness glimmered in her half-closed eyes. "Why shouldn't I tell McGonagall?"

“Because...” he began, still kneeling at her feet.

“Mmm, yeah?” she said, jamming her hands into her pockets and strolling away from him, a lazy, languid, panther-like grace she’d picked up from Blaise in her steps.

Smith scooted up from his knees and was at her side in a moment. He made a move as though to grab her and hold her in place, but she danced away out of his reach. "No manhandling," she drawled, "It makes me angry and you don't want that, do you?"

“Will you listen to me for a few...” he began, but she cut through with a cold, “What’s there to hear? I want to shoot your liver until its fit to be displayed in a museum of grotesque body parts, and you want to bludgeon my body into a bloody pulp. So, what’s there to hear?”

"A lot," he said, forced patience in his voice. "Listen, about those frogs, well, I swear I didn't want to do that – Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan dared me to and..."

"You damned liar," Rose snorted, contempt in her voice. "You can't even lie well. Dean is as much of a pacifist as Michael Corner and Seamus isn't *that* bloodthirsty. God, you're... pathetic, ergh."

"I'm sorry," he said, humbly as befitted a penitent sinner. "I know I'm pitiable, so that's why you should, um, take pity on me. I'm a loathsome retard, a coward, I live in a glass house, a hellion, a piranha..."

Rose took a seat at the Slytherin Table, crossed her legs daintily at her ankles and stared up mulishly at Smith, who was gesticulating as rapidly as he was speaking. "Oh shut up," she said crossly. "You're giving me a headache." He promptly shut up, but still stood in front of her, a hopeful look on his face.

"Right," she said, suddenly business-like, folding her arms on her chest. "You agree to do anything for me. In exchange for that, I..."

"Won't tell McGonagall that anything's happened," Smith said, clasping his hands earnestly. "Please."

"Scared of detention?" Rose asked lazily. "You poor, big baby." She laughed softly, enjoying the sight of Smith's jaw muscles clenching and unclenching tightly, anger flashing in his dark eyes. "Fine," she said sweetly. "I'll take you up on that offer." She steepled her fingers and smiled winningly up at him. Without thinking, she even batted her eyelashes at him, just because she was so used to doing that when she wanted to get something. The effect her brilliant emerald-green eyes and long, fluttering lashes produced was always stunning – and, unconsciously, she'd learnt to use that to her advantage until it had practically become a reflex action.

"Who's Jordan's replacement?"

"I am," Smith said, glowering sullenly down at her. "And stop winking at me."

Rose promptly stopped batting her eyelashes and glared up at him. “*You’re* the new Gryffindor seeker? *You?* You’re nothing but an ignominious, little wretch – God, what was Wood thinking of when he hired *you?*” She snorted in disgust. “I mean, I know he’s got pretty bad taste – just look at Johnson’s hairstyle and don’t even get me started on those two incompetent monsters he calls Beaters – but *still...* give Jordan some credit. If he was a Flobberworm, you’d be an amoeba on the Richter Scale of Flying.”

“And you’d be an *Choristoneura diversuma entomopoxvirus*,” Smith sniffed.

Rose looked up at him bemusedly. “Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes as if she understood what he’d meant. “Why do you so desperately want to avoid detention with McGonagall?”

Smith shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he said, brusquely, “I don’t think that’s any of your damn business.”

“On the contrary, *I* think...”

“Fuck what you think,” he said rudely. “That’s a personal question.”

*Fair enough. I may be a bitch, but at least I’m not a mean bitch. Well, not much...* “Whatever,” Rose yawned again, examining her fingernails. “Now, I’ve got something I want you to do, so listen carefully...”

Smith listened quite carefully, and then shook his head, looking horrified. “No way,” he whispered. “No *fucking* way.”

“Clean up your language,” she said sharply. “And why the hell can’t you do that? It’s not so hard – and you did say you’d do anything...”

“I meant things like doing your homework or poisoning your enemies – not *that!*”

“I might be the sexiest thing alive,” Rose snapped, suddenly defensive. “But I’m not stupid. I can damn well do my homework on my own.”

"Yeah," Smith smirked. "No wonder I heard McGonagall complaining about your 'abysmal' performance..."

Rose kicked him. "Back to business," she said nastily. "Either you do what I say or it's bye-bye free-time and come hither a thousand years of detention for you. It's up to you."

"Bitch," he muttered under his breath. Rose kicked him again. "Ouch!" he moaned, rubbing his ankle. "Shit, can't a guy say *anything*?"

"Not when it's offensive to me," she said coolly. "Today's Saturday. I want it up by tomorrow evening, latest. No backing out, dearie."

"Fine," he grumbled. "Just f-... ouch!"

"Clean up your language!" she yelled at him. "And get out of my sight – I don't want worms like you messing up the view."

Gingerly he moved away from her, resting his weight on the unaffected leg. Rose leaned her elbows against the table and smiled like a shark at his retreating back. One down, two to go.

**000**

Neville liked personality quizzes. Correction, Neville *loved* personality quizzes. He loved learning more about himself, about his shinningly unique persona, the overwhelming qualities his wonderful character possessed, what he needed to do to up his natural awesomeness...

Yeah, no wonder, you probably wouldn't go far if you called him an egocentric brat. He knew so much about himself that the thought had never crossed his mind that, perhaps, someone knew more about him than he knew himself.

*It takes two to tango*, Rose thought, a flash of short-lived anger reverberating through her body, as she smilingly handed the diary to Neville, assuring him it was the most tremendous, detailed, unique personality-testing quiz she'd ever seen and that her godmother, Aunt Mary, had given it to her on her birthday. He grinned, took it without another word, and chatted with her for a few moments before she announced she was going to the library to finish up her History

project. She wanted her precious personality-quizzer diary back soon, so he'd just have to finish with it by tomorrow, she explained to him – it was so helpful, she really couldn't imagine living without it...

"Sure thing," he said, bidding her farewell, a bright smile on his face now that he had the diary and could look forward to some time assessing his personality – yet again.

It hurt. It hurt that she had to deceive him to find out more about him. Her best friend.

It hurt. It hurt that he looked forward to reading about himself, more than talking with her. His best friend. Or was she? Maybe it was Draco, now, his precious, little, blond boy-toy (who should have been born female for all the simpering he did – really, he was Pansy's male counterpart in so many ways, it was a surprise they hadn't hooked up yet).

It hurt so much that she locked herself up in one of the bathroom stalls for a few minutes, sitting on the toilet seat, shuddering, and wishing she could cry. The tears didn't come and that made her feel worse than ever. How had they grown so far apart? What had come between them?

Rose-and-Neville, Neville-and-Rose, Nevilleroose, Roseneville...

What had become of the puffed-up-with-his-own-pride, little boy with the shining, brown eyes and the laughing, quick-tempered, little girl with the dancing, green eyes? Of course, everything was the same *outside*. She still had the beautiful eyes, the ready laugh, and the readier temper. He was still the friendly, if slightly arrogant, boy-next-door, sweet, creative, and polite.

It hurt to feel that it was *her* fault they'd landed up like this, that *she'd* turned into a monster. Because only monsters sneered down their noses at eager, little first-years like Colin Creevey and replied to his excited question about where Neville was with an icy, "He doesn't want to see you. Stop bothering him."



**A/N: 1014 reviews – wow, you guys are awesome! I heart you all!  
Just one more chapter and then I'll be on hiatus till the middle of  
March!**

## **Second Chances**

*“Reach for the stars, girls, but keep your feet firmly planted on the ground.”*

### **Iris Evans**

Lily Potter leaned against a counter – her back to the window from which the afternoon sunlight filtered into the kitchen – a cup of flavored tea in one hand, a letter from Petunia Dursley in the other. *Tweet-tweet*, chirped the bird-shaped, little clock hanging on the wall as it announced one o’clock. Lily half-glanced at it and thought vaguely, *Harry’ll be home soon*. Accordingly, she flicked her wand in the general direction of the cupboards, her eyes on the letter. Cutlery and crockery arranged itself neatly on the kitchen-table, ready for hell, high water, and Harry Potter, while Lily read on.

Lily and Petunia had not seen each other for over twelve years – ever since Lily’s wedding, where Petunia had refused to play matron-of-honor and had attended only for the sake of propriety and what-would-the-relatives-think. She’d sat through the whole wedding, her tiny, blond baby sleeping in her arms, a grim, stony scowl plastered on her face throughout, a few days short of Lily’s twentieth birthday. Single-handedly, she’d almost managed to ruin her sister’s wedding day, just as her sister had, without help, nearly destroyed her own. Both resented each other for that.

Lily had been prepared to break off all contact with the Muggle world – except for the occasional movie – after her father had died, shortly after Rose was born, and indeed had ceased to number her sister among one of the living until...

A little note had arrived that Christmas, and with it one of the ugliest vases she’d ever seen. Lily hadn’t seen the need of replying to it – she was sure Petunia was only trying to get rid of the vase by fostering it on her sister, and had no good intentions whatsoever (because Petunia never did!). Secretly, she’d been glad when one-year-old Rose had broken the vase, zooming through the house on her miniature toy broomstick. Vases that ugly *deserved* to be broken. So did relationships with sisters like Petunia. No more letters, no more “gifts” had arrived from the Dursley household after that, and

Lily told herself she was glad. Petunia was just, well... Petunia. It was useless to pretend she cared about her sister, or that her sister cared about her.

*If a person betrays me, I cut him or her out of my life. No second chances. Life is too short to hand out like candy to trick-or-treaters. You don't need to be friends with everyone.*

Dumbledore might preach about second chances until he was black in the face. He was an idealist. And it wasn't an ideal world. Second chances just didn't work in the real world. You'd be stupid to think they did. You needed to look at the practical side. Lily was practical.

Three years passed by. Voldemort fell. Life returned back to what the Wizarding World called normal – what Lily had never been accustomed to. James finally became a fully-fledged Auror and Lily began to write articles for magazines. She was pregnant again. In the thick of things, the flurry of activity that hummed around her, keeping her busy day and night long, she almost forgot about her estranged sister.

And then, one day, four-year-old Rose had been going through the family albums, perched in her father's lap, sucking her thumb in deep thought as she gazed at picture upon picture of the strange, blond girl with her mother in most of the Muggle photos, a girl she'd never seen.

"She's so pretty," Rose had said earnestly when she'd seen Petunia's wedding photo. Even James had admitted that Petunia looked stunning in her long, flowing, white satin gown with the misty lace veil, the glittering tiara, the pink roses, the glossy blond hair braided like a coronet on top of her head, the shining, enraptured look in her eyes, and her dazzling smile as she'd gazed upon her groom.

Petunia had never been one for smiles and Lily had always been called the beauty of the Evans family... but when Petunia *did* take it into her head to smile genuinely; she did it with her whole heart. Rose, Lily reflected then, had her aunt's smile more than her mother's. Dazzling, simply dazzling.

“Who is she?” four-year-old Rose had asked. A second later, she’d caught sight of Lily in her bridesmaid’s swirling, sea-foamy gown and demanded, “Why do you look so grumpy?”

“Because it was the middle of summer,” Lily chuckled. “Because that dress was sticky. That’s Petunia – your auntie. Don’t you remember I told you about her last month?”

“That’s your Mummy’s sister,” James had explained when Rose had continued to look confused. A month meant an eternity to four-year-old Rose. “No wonder she’s so beautiful.”

“You sly fox!” Lily had chuckled, hitting the side of James’ head playfully. “Angling for some chocolate cake?”

“Well what else can I do when my wife’s such a wonderful cook?” James had asked cheerfully. “Don’t you agree, Rosalie?”

“Hmm...” Rose grunted, thumbing her aunt’s picture thoughtfully. “Mummy, if she’s my auntie, why haven’t I ever seen her?” She stared up, bewildered, at her mother, a four-year-old’s innocent confusion shining in her eyes. “And she has yellow hair too,” she added for good measure. “You have red hair – so you two can’t be sisters.”

Lily had been pregnant with Harry, so James pointed at her three-month stomach to illustrate his point as he explained calmly, “Say you have a little sister and she has red hair like your Mummy. You have black hair, but you’ll still be sisters.”

“Yes,” Rose said as calmly. “But I’ll see my sister. I haven’t seen *her*.” She pointed to the blonde bride.

“And a little child shall lead them all,” James had muttered under his breath, hugging Rose hard and laughing slightly. “Never mind, Rosalie, you’ll understand when you’re...”

“Older?” Rose intercepted, sounding aggravated, “No I won’t! I’m big enough now – I’m bigger than I was yesterday.”

“Yes, but you’re not as big today as you’ll be tomorrow,” James had replied serenely.

Rose had punched him and he’d lightly punched her back. It would probably have escalated to a joyous pillow fight if Lily hadn’t raised her voice, a hard, bitter note Rose had never heard in her voice. “She hated me,” she’d said sharply. “She told me five years ago that she never wanted to see hair or hide of me anywhere. That I was a wretch, a disgrace to her and her family.” She snorted contemptuously and threw herself petulantly on the bed, next to her husband and daughter. “Not that she hadn’t said all that before, of course...” she laughed unpleasantly. “Petunia always did think herself a cut above me. She was always jealous of me.” Her voice sounded very bitter, even to her own ears. It sounded like *she* had been the jealous one. Not true, not true at all. She’d been the pretty one, the popular one, and the one with the brains. What had Petunia been?

“Let me tell you something, Rose Iris Potter,” she’d said coldly, emerald-green eye meeting emerald-green eye. “If a person betrays me, I cut him or her out of my life. No second chances. Life is too short to hand out like candy. You don’t need to be friends with everyone. Remember that.” *Severus, Petunia, almost Mary, almost James...*

“That’s not fair,” Rose had said frankly, looking her mother straight in the eye, adult’s words spilling forth from a child’s lips, in a child’s voice. “That’s not nice of you. What if you hurt their feelings?”

*You shouldn’t hurt anyone’s feelings, Rose. That’s not nice.*

*You shouldn’t hurt anyone’s feelings, Rose. That’s not nice.*

*You shouldn’t hurt anyone’s feelings, Rose. That’s not nice.*

That’s what you taught four-year-olds. Lily wanted to be a good mother. Good mothers taught their babies things like that. But you couldn’t expect a baby to understand everything...

“You’re right, Rosalie,” James had said, stroking her hair. “That’s not nice. What do you think, Lily?” He’d looked expectantly at her, thoughtfulness shining in his hazel eyes.

"I think it's naptime for you, Rose," Lily had said, a strained note in her voice. "And I think she's too young for you to feed your utopian propaganda to, James." She'd caught Rose up in her arms and scowled grimly at her husband. She didn't like having Petunia brought up. It reminded her too much of the mistakes she'd made in life. Like Petunia was a symbol for everything bad and wrong she'd ever done, like Petunia's words were true – that she was a freak, crazy, she didn't deserve to live... those words had hurt her when she was eleven. Why did they still hurt, thirteen years later?

"Don't you miss her?" James had called innocently, closing the albums and blowing an air-kiss to Rose, who was protesting that she didn't want to sleep, she was fine now... "Your sister?"

"No, of course not," Lily had said curtly, coldly. "Petunia's to me what Mrs. Malfoy and that Lestrangle woman are to 'Dromeda."

James hadn't mentioned the matter again, but Rose had.

*"Why don't you like to talk about her?"*

*"Was it her fault or was it yours?"*

*"How can she be my auntie if I've never seen her?"*

She'd mentioned it persistently for a week, until she'd forgotten about it. Lily had been relieved that she'd stopped asking – some of her questions were very uncomfortable – but after they were over, she'd found herself thinking. Couldn't it have turned out differently? Yes, it had been Petunia who'd begun the rift and Petunia who'd delivered the coup de grace to their friendship, but Lily had helped widen it, hadn't she? Reading her mail, laughing at Vernon, playing show-pony as frequently as she could, belittling and scaring Petunia later on, and taking pride in it... yes, she'd done her part.

She wasn't Madonna. She wasn't Mother Teresa. She was just another nice, friendly, bright girl who'd die for the ones she loved – pretty, funny, married to the man of her dreams... she didn't need anything, life was just perfect. But then why did she feel so lonely, suddenly? Like she needed something more?

So, against her better judgment, afraid of rejection, terrifically nervous, and feeling horrifically un-Gryffindorish, and just plain *silly* for doing this, she scoured the attic for the diary she'd kept during first year and baked a huge chocolate cake, without using an ounce of magic for either. Lily'd kept a diary for every single year of her life, ever since Grandma Daisy had presented her with one – and the stern adjunction to write in it everyday and try to act more like a little lady – on her seventh birthday. Trepidation rising to fever pitch in her heart, she'd mailed cake, diary, and a recent picture James had taken by Muggle camera of her and Rose to Petunia's address.

Then began the agonizingly long wait, which Lily spent yelling at husband and daughter, fretting endlessly, and consuming nine different types of cakes per week. After two weeks, she'd received the diary Petunia had kept when she was fourteen – the year their mother had died -, a box of rock candy (Lily's favorite sweets), and a few photos of Petunia and her two children. Slowly, but surely, piece by piece, their relationship began to mend, like petals unfurling bit by bit to produce a beautiful flower.

Now they exchanged letters frequently – chatty, funny letters choke-full of gossip, recipes, book and movie recommendations, and Muggle photos that Lily looked forward to. They made sure never to mention their husbands or magic in their letters, but they talked about almost everything else. Petunia had a son, twelve-year-old Dudley, and a nine-year-old daughter named Camellia in keeping with the floral tradition of their family, which had prevailed ever since Great-Grandma Pansy had named her three daughters, Daisy, Ivy and Holly. Lily knew their birthdays, their favorite kinds of sweets – Dudley had a lot of them – their schools, and grades – even though she'd never seen them in real life.

Petunia and Lily had met up many times after their compromise – but only in neutral spots like malls, parks, and movie halls. Never at their houses. Never face to face with each other's children. She didn't know why they hadn't crossed that particular barrier. They just... hadn't, in eight years. It seemed like they never would, now.

Lily finished the letter and ran a hand through her thick, dark red hair, a soft smile on her face. Camellia *still* hadn't outgrown her three-year

crush on her big brother's best mate, Piers Polkiss. Petunia was beginning to fear she never would – her crush had lasted roughly one-third of her short life – and she was beginning to fear having to introduce her daughter as Camellia Polkiss, fifteen years from now. Imagine how the name would sound! Dudley had failed in Maths again, but on the bright side, he'd aced Geography, coming third in class. Petunia recommended *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. Apparently, she'd been up until three in the morning, reading it because she simply couldn't put it down. Lily would buy it – she liked most books that Petunia did.

She took another sip from her cup of tea and glanced at the clock. One-thirty... Harry should have been home ten minutes ago. Goodness, where was he? She hoped he wasn't at Baker's eddy with the bigger boys – she didn't like their crowd, even if seven-year-old Harry was fascinated with them. She'd have to scold him if he didn't get home by five minutes... Snidget would wake up, punctually as ever, at two-thirty... she'd have to go upstairs, feed her...

She heard the front door clang open and knew that it was Harry. He must have had a bad day at school. "Wash your face and hands, honey," she shouted, setting down the letter and the empty cup of tea. She flicked her wand and the soup and noodles she'd prepared ladled itself dutifully on the plates on the table. The pitcher of water began to pour itself into a glass.

She heard the sound of a bag crashing to the floor and light footsteps pattering across the hall, towards the kitchen. She looked at the doorway, ready for Harry, a warm, inviting smile on her face, the question "How was your day?" already at her lips. And then she stopped short at the sight of the figure that had arrived at the threshold.

"Oh my god," she whispered, dropping her wand accidentally. The pitcher of water fell to the floor with a clang. Water spilt down the floor and the glass tethered dangerously on the edge of the table, but Lily ignored all that. After stooping to scoop up her wand, she crossed the room in one bound, to her son. *What on earth...?*



Harry bent down, the movement obviously causing him pain and set down something that *resembled* a cat onto the floor. The animal shot across the floor and hid under the kitchen table, uttering odd grunts. Lily ignored the creature, scooped up her son, and carried him away to the bathroom, mouth set tightly.

“It was all Rick Blair’s fault,” Harry sobbed, wrapping his bruised arms around his mother’s neck. Blood flowed from a cut on his thigh, staining Lily’s pants. He buried his head in his mother’s hair and Lily felt blood seeping into her shirt. It made her feel slightly nauseous.

“Shh...” she muttered, patting his back comfortingly, trying to keep her voice level and calm, trying to keep the panic out of it. She was the grown-up here. Grown-ups were supposed to be calm. That was just how it worked out – let the kids panic and scream their hearts out, *you’re* supposed to keep control just because you’re older. “Let’s get you cleaned up – we’ll talk later.” She entered the bathroom and set him on the counter, next to the sink. She flicked her wand. Towels and soap flew obediently towards them and Lily let the hot water run from the tap.

She cast a quick glance at Harry, checking for the spots that needed attention most. He’d split his lip, his nose and arms were badly bruised, and there was a deep crescent-moon shaped cut just above his left knee. Tears and blood and dust and snot mingled together in a grisly concoction down his face, but there was a fiery defiance in his eyes, in the set of his jaw that alerted Lily to the fact that he’d been fighting. She’d often patched up Rose after similar fights. Rose was a fighter, simple and plain. She’d never learnt about that little something called discretion, never learnt to bow down. She was the type that would break before they bent.

But Harry...

He was a pacifist. He fell into line under bullies. He liked to read. He had an overactive imagination and an arcing fear of getting hurt. Then why...?

“Shh...” Lily muttered when Harry opened his mouth. She stripped off his blue T-shirt and clucked her tongue at the blossoming bruises scattered over his chest and torso. She dabbed a fluffy white towel

into the hot water and gently began rubbing it over his body. She flicked her wand and a first-aid kit floated from her bedroom down to the bathroom. She finished cleaning Harry's torso and arms and then ran the towel gently over his face, removing most of the dust and snot. She was so careful that he didn't cry out once in pain as the towel moved over minor cuts and his split lip. Lily had plenty of experience tending as gently as possible to cuts and bruises – Rose had been an education, all by herself.

Then she began selecting bandages, creams, and lotions from the first-aid kit. She tended his split lip and the cut above his knee first – they were the most serious. Then she used the special cream she'd picked up the last time she'd been to Diagon Alley to heal his bruises quickly. By the time she was finished, half-an-hour later, he looked far more presentable than before – but still very dirty and very, very defiant. She let the water in the bathtub run – he needed a good, hot bath first.

"You want to talk about it?" she asked him quietly, after the water in the tub had started running.

Harry blinked at her. "You're not mad at me?"

"Well..." Lily smiled slightly. "Depends on what your story is. You can tell me later – first you need a bath and then some hot food. I'll bring Snidget down – she'll wake up soon. So..."

"Can you please take care of the cat?" Harry asked urgently, a desperate pleading in his voice. And then it all came out in a rush, words tripping over each other, voice squeaky and excited. "After school was over, me and Liam went to Baker's eddy and we saw Rick Blair and his pals *stoning* that poor cat. They were laughing and chasing it and scaring it, really, really bad and Liam yelled at them to stop, or he'd tell his mum. Then they started laughing at him and then... then..." Here, a mutinous expression crossed his face and his hazel eyes, so like his father's, flashed behind his glasses.

"He called Rose bad names," Harry said. "I can't tell you them, Mummy, but they were *really* horrible and the way he said them..." He shuddered angrily. "I told him I wouldn't let him call my sister names and I-I punched him, and then..." He gesticulated hopelessly

and Lily grimaced understandingly. She closed the taps, because the bathtub was full and helped Harry out of his jeans. "I had to take the cat too, of course," Harry sighed. "You'll feed it and clean it up too, won't you, Mummy?"

"Of course," Lily promised. Secretly, she decided that she was going to give Mrs. Blair a call. She knew Rick well enough, a nasty seventh-grade bully. Rose and he had been in the same class, from kindergarten to fifth grade. To put it mildly, they'd never gotten along together. To put it in its true light, people ran for bomb shelters when the two were together.

"Soak there, for half-an-hour at least," she told Harry, patting the top of his head. He slid into the hot water and uttered a moan.

"Mummy, you aren't angry with me, are you?" he asked as she was picking up his clothes. He peered at her through concerned hazel eyes and she had to smile. *His eyes are so like his father's...*

"No," she said softly, "no, I'm not mad. I think that was very... chivalrous of you, very brave, but, er, it was a little foolish too. You have to learn to bend sometimes, Harry, give way. Not everyone can be Rose – it's not like you have to live up to your sister's, er, legacy."

He looked at her in surprise. "How did you know?" he asked, his voice so grave that it made him seem even younger than he was. "How did you know that was how I felt...?"

"Because I'm your mother," she told him, feeling like hugging him just then. "What kind of mother would I be if I didn't know?"

"You'd still be a very nice Mum," Harry told her earnestly, his eyes shining with love. "You're just about the bestest Mum in the world, Mummy."

Touched, Lily could only smile. It was one of the greatest compliments she'd ever received. She took his discarded clothes, shut the bathroom door, and entered the kitchen. A thin, dusty golden cat was curled up on the windowsill, sunlight gleaming off its yellow coat. It looked up when Lily entered and surveyed her cautiously for a moment. She stood at the threshold, waiting for it to get used to her.

It scrutinized her a moment and for an uncanny moment, Lily felt like she was being measured up, analyzed for her worth. Then, slowly, it put its head down.

She'd been accepted. She didn't know why she felt so relieved that it hadn't just scampered off. It just felt like a friend, a friend that she hadn't seen in a long time, and that had just found her.

**000**

"Honey, you are a *carnivore*."

Blaise Zabini greeted her on Sunday morning with a resounding kiss on the cheek and a hearty slap on the back. Rose blushed until her face was as red as Ginny's hair. If it had been any other boy she'd have laughed right back, thrown back a witty comment, and slapped him affectionately on the back – unless, of course, it had been Smith, in which case she would have attacked him with the nearest piece of furniture. But Blaise...

"Oh don't tell me you're actually *blushing*, Potter, this is just too rich..."

Redder than ever, Rose shoved him off. She could feel her cheeks burning and tugged her hair embarrassedly. "Berk," she muttered, not meeting his eyes and trying to side-step him. He caught her wrist, laughing.

"Don't go away now, darling," he cooed, throwing an arm over her shoulder and peering up at her with an odd mixture of amusement and pride. "I feel like worshipping you."

"Um... I'm flattered?" Rose suggested, attempting to shove him off as tactfully as she could.

"Oh no, you don't," he chuckled, clinging on tighter than ever to her. "Don't tell me you have a *crush* on me, baby."

"Enough with the misogynistic nicknames," a stiff voice from behind them said. Rose half-turned and beheld Millicent who was glancing crossly down at Blaise. However, her scowl quickly turned into a

warm, pleased smile when she saw Rose, and her brown eyes sparkled. She strode forwards and put another arm over Rose's shoulder. Rose flinched under the added weight but Millicent was already steering her forwards, out of the Common Room, chattering brightly.

"You have no idea what they're saying about you," she was saying excitedly. "It's a pity you woke up so late, because we could have shown you, he put it up between eight and eight-thirty and..."

"I've got some pictures from that creepy Gryffindor first-year who was selling them," Blaise supplied helpfully. "Wait a minute, I have them in my pocket." He fumbled for a few seconds before producing a batch of photos and thrusting them into Rose's face. "Five sickles per – fair bargain, that kid's a good businessman."

Rose held out the pictures and then began to laugh. Eventually, she had to lean against a wall to stay upright, her body being racked by convulsions of laughter. There were four photos – each of them different angles of a sheet flying from the top of the Astronomy Tower. Two were very highly-detailed close-ups. On the neat, white, regulation-Hogwarts bed sheet were proclaimed, in thick scarlet ink, the words:

*I want to have hot, rabid, crazy sex with Ronald Bilius Weasley (yum, yum) on top of a fluffy, hot-pink rabbit in Minerva McGonagall's office.*

Z.E.S, 12

Beneath the signature was a crudely-drawn, yawning lion with a mane in golden ink. It was magnificent. It was glorious. It was a treasure she'd save up for posterity.

"I so need to show Uncle Padfoot these," Rose murmured as soon as she could speak. "Honestly, I love that boy."

"Finnegan spread the word that you blackmailed Smith," Millicent said, steering Rose up the stairs, something akin to reverence in her voice. "How?"

“Me? Sweet, little me?” Rose asked, widening her eyes, putting her hand on her hand and doing her best impression of a lovable, helpless, little kitten. “You wound me, Mistress Bulstrode! Now, how would *I*, weak young *I*,...”

Blaise elbowed her in the ribs, grinning. “Slytherin all the way through, aren’t you?” he asked wryly. “Never mind, you don’t have to tell us – all magicians have their secrets. Keep it to yourself, enchantress.”

“But I *had* nothing to do with it,” Rose protested, keeping up the act and refraining from a smile when Millicent rolled up her eyes exasperatedly. “What hold could I have Smith? You *know* he hates my guts out!”

“Your voice is perfectly reeking with italics,” Blaise drawled, wrapping an arm around her waist casually. “That’s how we can tell you’re lying – you’re protesting too much to be telling the truth.”

“Oh,” Rose murmured, squirming out of Blaise grip and draping an arm over Millicent’s shoulder. “Oh, yeah, right. Um... did Smith get detention?” She looked at them both anxiously.

Millicent snorted disdainfully. “Hardly – McGonagall looked ready to expel him, but there isn’t any *real* evidence, if you think about it. Sure, Z.E.S is his initials, and the lion was a dead giveaway... but he wormed out of detention by claiming that it could just as well have been any of his, er, ill-wishers – I think that’s what he said, right Blaise? We heard McGonagall howling at him in the Hall, but she shooed us away when we came too close.”

“What do you care though?” Blaise demanded. “I would’ve thought you’d be only too happy to see him in...”

“It’s part of our, erm, contract,” Rose mumbled, tugging at a strand of hair restlessly. “Are you *positive* he hasn’t received detention?”

“Ninety-five percent,” Millicent assured her. “Zabini – stop sniggering. He’s a big boy, Rose, I’m sure he can take care of himself...”

*Oh, yeah, right. Grossest over-statement of the century. Zacharias Smith take care of himself – hah!* “Have you seen Ron?” Rose asked, grinning.

“Nay – do you think he’ll be mad at you?” Blaise asked as they climbed up a set of stone steps, arm in arm altogether.

Rose giggled and shook her head. “He’ll have a laugh out of it,” she said confidently. “Though he might swat me on the head for it... and somehow, I don’t think Padma Patil’s going to be too happy with me. I think she has a crush on him. Poor darling, so does Smith, actually...”

*“... Don’t know why he hangs out with you, you’re such a freak! You don’t deserve to be friends with him; you’re so horrible and bratty. He’s so nice to everyone and you’re so nasty, all the time...”*

*Rose flipped her hair impatiently and snapped, “Sounds like you’re in love with him.”*

*It was amazing how fast his cheeks turned red and how loudly he yelled, “I am not!”*

“Really?” Blaise and Millicent asked together, eyes and voices agog with incredulous interest.

“Shh, don’t tell anyone,” Rose smiled warmly. “You know how touchy he is about his, er, sexuality – always fires up whenever he gets teased, just like Draco does...”

“He is so gay,” Blaise said matter-of-factly. “Or, else, he has an inferiority complex and is overcompensating for something. Tsk, tsk – Hogwarts could sure do with some free therapy for all of its students.”

“Draco and Smith would be top-of-the-list, of course,” Millicent said, equally matter-of-factly. “Priority always goes to the most seriously damaged in the head...” They’d left the dungeons and were just at the doors to the Great Hall, all three still arm-in-arm. The sweet aroma of warm, fresh bread, and pastries tickled Rose’s nostrils in the most delightful way. It was ten o’ clock and her stomach was grumbling. Time to dig in!

“Food!” Rose sang, slipping out of Millicent and Blaise’s holds and practically running towards the Slytherin Table, already anticipating the soft, delicate texture of...

“Hey, Rose!”

*Oh, go to hell just for one day. PLEASE!!* Ignoring the familiar voice, Rose piled up a plate with everything that she could lay her hands on until it was almost too heavy to carry. “No, Neville, I’m *busy* right now,” she said impatiently, without even casting a glance at the brown-haired boy who was busily tapping her shoulder.

“No, you’re not,” he whined, tugging her arm. “I have something *important* to tell you.”

Rose ignored him, and loaded her plate with two omelets and five pancakes. “Let her eat,” she heard Blaise laugh and tell Neville. “She deserves it – didn’t you hear about...”

“Yes, yes, I did,” Neville said impatiently, throwing a dirty look at Blaise. “It’s over the school, but... you’re not taking *nine* muffins are you?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” Rose demanded, looking at him innocently. “Like he said, I deserve it.”

“Yes, but...”

“There can be no buts in this matter,” Rose said firmly, choosing three croissants. “I am a growing, young girl. I *need* food to stay healthy and fit.”

“Healthy does not equal thirty stone,” Blaise pointed out wryly, snagging a muffin from her plate and popping it into his mouth. “And that’s what you’re going to end up as if you don’t stop... am I bothering you, Longbottom?”

Rose glanced around just in time to see an irritated expression flash across Neville’s face before it turned blank and cool again. His eyes were a little hard though, and his voice was definitely strained as he said, “No, of course not.”



Blaise's eyes were dancing with mischief as he leaned over and took a croissant from Rose's plate. Millicent looked uncertain, nervous as she caught Blaise's arm and forced him to stay in place. She looked like she was scared at what he was going to do next. Rose couldn't blame her – there was a dangerous glint in his eyes, in his too-wide smile. "Playing the..." Blaise began, but Millicent intercepted him with a loud, "We won't disturb you two – I'm sure you have a lot to catch up on, so we'll..."

She feebly nodded towards the exit and steered Blaise, still cheerfully munching his croissant, towards the exit. Blaise wiped the crumbs off his face with his free arm, allowing Millicent to steer him away, and blew an air-kiss to Rose. She grinned at him, and then turned to Neville. "What was that about?" she demanded.

He was inspecting his fingernails very carefully and didn't look up at her. "Are you finished getting your food?" he mumbled, an almost apologetic note in his voice.

"Yeah..." Rose said, glancing down at her plate – two omelets, five pancakes, eight muffins, and two croissants. "C'mon... um, Neville?"

He was still inspecting his fingernails. "Ihavesomethingveryimportanttotellyou," he said in one breath, without looking up.

"Sorry?" Rose said, leaning down, trying to catch his eyes. "Didn't..."

He took a deep breath, and still looking down said, "I have something important to tell you."

"Sure – let's grab a seat," Rose said, tugging at his arm. "And then you can congratulate me and tell me why you're mad at Blaise and how you liked the quiz-maker." She'd asked him for the diary at lunch, but he'd just looked down and promised to return it the next day. She hadn't thought anymore about it. Surely he was finished with it, by now?

"It's not that," Neville said, looking up at her finally, a strange, indecipherable expression on his face. "It's that... oh, hey Draco."

A short blond boy was sauntering towards them, a sullen expression on his face. He reached them, shot Rose a cold glance, and said curtly to Neville, "Told her yet?"

"Told me what?" Rose demanded, shifting her hold on her heavy plate.

Draco spared her plate, piled with food, a cursory, disgusted glance, and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "*Bourgeois*" under his breath. "Well?" he asked Neville, sounding a little disgruntled.

Neville was carefully avoiding her eyes, Rose noticed. "What's this all about?" she asked Neville suspiciously. "Come on, you can tell me... I promise I won't be mad at you."

"S not about that," Neville whispered, digging his nails into his palms and looking up at her, a supplicating expression on his face. He took a deep breath before saying, a note of strained calm, like he was forcing himself to keep his cool, in his voice, "Rose – it's lost. I lost it."

**A/N: Well that's that! I'll be on hiatus from today until the 7th of March – and after that I'll be promoted to tenth grade, w00t! Please review everyone – you won't get any more chances to review SOB for nearly a month!**

**Alexandra: Tom's hardly looking forward to hiring teenagers as DEs anyway – Draco was a special case – so no question of hiring an unqualified 'little girl' can arise! Well, what else can you expect from Remus? He's fatherly and cute all the time, to everyone!**

**Kike: She's a Slytherin – what else can you expect from her?**

**SRFan!/: Long time no see – I missed you! Remus is of course much happier now than he was in canon, his friends are still alive, he gets to see their kids, has a stable job... what's your idea about Draco and Malfoy senior? I'd love to hear it!**

## ***Cobwebs of Questions***

*"Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no to-morrow. To forget time, to forgive life, to be at peace. "*

It took a moment for the fact to register. Then Rose exploded, *"What?"*

"It's only a diary." Draco sounded disgruntled. Disgruntled that he had to speak to her, even to sit near her. "Why don't you try acting your age, Potter? Oh wait, that's impossible. You'd need to scare up some dignity to act your age – and you're just blood trash. Dignity isn't part of your vocabulary."

It was the longest he'd spoken to her ever since school had started. But Rose ignored him. Goddamn, she didn't care what an elitist, little brat like him thought about her. Who gave a shit for dignity?

"Are you serious?" she gasped, staring at Neville.

His face was tight, miserable, but painfully genuine. He nodded. "It's a long story."

Rose pushed away her plate, suddenly not hungry. Her fists clenched and unclenched of their own accord – they wanted to strangle Neville, to throttle him. Her ears craved for the sweet music of his dying groans, his choking gasps for mercy. Her nostrils quivered and, for a moment, she smelt blood – tangy, sharp – upon the air. The intensity of the scent sent shivers down her spine – she might as well have been at a battlefield, surrounded by the dead and the dying, rivers of blood flowing down their bodies. "I'm listening," she hissed. Unconsciously, she'd reached for a knife and was running her fingers down the cold metal.

The look on her face must have frightened Neville and Draco, for they both appraised her warily now. Gently, Neville put his hand on hers and pried the knife from her fingers. "Now you are," he said, pulling the knife away from her. "Rose, like I said, it's a very long story, and I

want you to listen without interrupting me. Okay?" He waited for her to nod slowly, before plunging on.

"I haven't been completely honest with you, not for a long time. You know I was staying in Scotland during the summer with Gran. Well, on the, er, 25th or 26th it might have been, I had a very... a very weird thing happened."

"Surreal," Draco supplied.

"Right – surreal. We'd done a lot of hiking that day and I was pretty peaked when we got back to the inn, around four or five. I had something to eat and then I passed out in my room – Gran was downstairs, playing bridge with a few old people. The next thing I knew, it was dark outside, but somebody had lit the lights in my room so it was kind-of dim. Somebody was shaking me up. I got up and... Rose, there was a house-elf in front of me."

Rose stared at him incredulously. "Beg pardon?"

"Temporary suspension of belief is required right now," Neville said, smiling weakly. "But, wait, let me finish. He was kind of dirty and had huge green eyes and a skimpy rag –"

"That was *his* fault," Draco said coldly. "Dobby likes to stay as filthy and un-presentable as possible – it isn't our fault. He's just about the laziest, queerest, stubbornest elf ever. Not at all like Kreacher or Jip or..."

"Whatever," Neville said. "So, right, I was being shaken up and then I mumbled something and the elf just squeaked into my ear, 'Master Neville Longbottom! Dobby is most honored to meet you!' And then I bolted upright and the elf began prancing around and bowing and trying to kiss my fingers and squeaking and, in general, just being very obsequious."

"Obsequious?" Rose and Draco questioned at the same time. They didn't know what the word meant.

"Worshipful," Neville supplied. "And, he kept on spewing loads of, erm..." He looked questioningly at Draco.

“Rubbish, the sort of thing you’d expect from a disobedient, ungrateful, toadying, little house-elf,” Draco said icily, a dangerous light in his mist-grey eyes. “Nothing to be taken seriously, of course.”

“Yes, of course,” Neville said gravely, but Rose knew that he didn’t agree with Draco. His eyes were sharp and alert, his fingers twitching restlessly like they did whenever he knew he was treading on delicate ground and that it boded well to be wary, careful, *obsequious*.

“He told me things about how he was cruelly mistreated by his masters, but that it was better nowadays than it had been during the rise of You-Know-Who when house-elves were treated even worse than vermin. And that You-Know-Who had been defeated by, er, me, and so house-elves were considerably better off nowadays. About how grateful and honored he was to see me, and loads of stuff about my greatness and nobility – just because I asked him to take a seat – and well, I suppose you get the general idea? I asked him his name and he said it was Dobby and that he worked for the Malfoys, and how full of sin and blackness and iniquity the whole lineage was.

Then, he sorta became more serious and said a very bad thing was going to happen at Hogwarts, and that I shouldn’t go back to school, please stay at home or else I’d be butchered in my bed or something of that sort. Of course, I told him to clear off and he looked at me very sadly, begged me to reconsider, and then just simply vanished. I thought it was just a nightmare the next day – because I really was very tired with all that hiking, maybe it was just a hallucination.”

*The sound of laughter, bright lights, and that nice, warm smell he’d come to identify with freshly-baked biscuits and little yellow flowers. He was happy, very happy, warm and secure, snug as the kittens frolicking on the floor. Then screams and he began to cry and a streak of blinding light, green, green, green, a high-pitched yell and then he was sinking from an emerald sky into empty black, falling, falling, falling...*

*Neville Longbottom toppled out of bed, neatly onto the beige-and-scarlet carpet. Rose Potter, lying askew on the pale blue sheets dotted with little yellow flowers, fell too with a scream muffled by the hardwood floor. He huddled in the sheets, sweating and moaning. It*

*was only when Rose had gotten her bearings back and had begun to scream at him in earnest that he finally woke up, out of the nightmare.*

"What makes you think it wasn't?" Rose asked interestedly. "You've had lots of creative dreams before, haven't you?"

"Those flashes of green light aren't just empty dreams," Neville said, patiently, for the umpteenth time. "They must have happened a long time ago."

"I'm just saying that it *could* have been a hallucination, and what does it have to do with my diary anyway?"

"Everything," Neville said brown eyes dreamy. "Remember how I couldn't get onto Platform Nine-and-Three Quarters on the first of September? I couldn't, because the barrier simply didn't let me. Well, we all thought it was because the barrier had sealed itself magically somehow and we were all puzzled but... it was Dobby. He confessed yesterday."

He looked at her very significantly as he said, "I finished doing that quiz before you returned from the library, yesterday. Rose, you've been lying to me."

Rose's cheeks turned red automatically. "And you haven't?" she asked hotly, hackles rising.

"I haven't told you any direct lies," he countered, sounding a little cold, "Half-truths, yes, three-fourth truths. Not direct lies."

"That's the *same* as..."

"Of course it isn't. Subtle gradations and all that."

"Subtle *what*? God, you sound just like —" Rose stopped short at the look — hard, stone-set, suddenly terrified — on Neville's pale, drawn face. She should have spared him. She would have spared him, if suddenly her anger — never far from the surface — hadn't blazed forth in an uncontrollably childish rage. "Just like Quirrell," she finished, triumph in her voice. "And come to think about it — well, You-Know-Who, don't you?"

Draco was watching their exchange curiously. He looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't bring himself to acknowledge Rose any more than he had. The words "You-Know-Who" had no pronounced effect on him – he'd probably just heard her sentence as *"And come to think about it – well, you know who, don't you?"*

Subtle gradations and all that.

Neville reeled back, as if she'd struck him across the face. His shoulders slumped and he looked down at his palms. It was a few moments before he spoke and though his voice sounded a little thick, it was perfectly modulated, calm even. "I was just flipping the pages of that book, trying to see if anyone else had taken any quizzes and if I could see their results. I tapped it with my wand and then suddenly, my mind went a little blank. Like I dunno, one second, I was tapping that thing with my wand and half-looking at the clock, and the next thing I knew, a whole minute had gone by practically."

Now he looked up at Rose, and she was suddenly reminded vividly of a line she'd read somewhere in a book, long ago. *An old soul trapped in a young body*. She shivered and pinched her fingers to remind herself that she was real, that they weren't part of a book or a story with a scary ending, they were just normal kids to whom a few abnormal things had happened, but, hey, they could handle it, couldn't they? A look at Neville's worn face sent a shiver of doubt sweeping up her spine – could they?

"I've had a bit of an experience with that type of thing," he said quietly. "Do you know what it's called, Rose?" He moved his face, so Draco couldn't see it, and mouthed "Possession" across the table, to Rose.

Rose wavered between skeptic incredulity and stunned terror. The look on her face as she veered from one extreme to the other must have been pretty funny because Draco's face contorted into a scornful sneer. He looked even uglier than usual with his face like that. *How does Neville stand ferrety little things like him and Colin, anyway? Is he compensating for his lack of height, when compared with me and Ron, by befriending similarly vertically challenged boys?* "How do you remember being p... I mean, how do you remember?" she asked neutrally.

“By not remembering,” he said calmly. “Time going away, me not remembering what I’d been doing then, sort of blanking out at random intervals, an awful lot of dizziness... yeah, you’d remember it too if you’d been through that kind of thing for oh, six months.” There was an odd note in his voice, something Rose couldn’t quite place. It puzzled her because she couldn’t *quite* place it, but she’d heard that same note in someone else’s voice, not so long ago, someone, somewhere...

*“I,” he said, half-smiling, his voice very gentle. “I saw my family. Mum, Dad, Bill, Charlie, Percy, the twins, Ginny and me – without the scar.” He gestured bitterly. “We looked so happy there.” He looked sad and happy at the same time and turned abruptly from Rose, staring determinedly out of the window, blinking back what Rose guessed was tears.*

When she’d been eleven her vocabulary hadn’t been as extensive as it was now. She’d only been able to use basic curse-words – whenever she dared use them at all – identify basic to only slightly more complex emotions and feelings. Who knew a whole year could change you so much?

*He feels bitter, she thought, and... ashamed. Like he should have done something, like it’s his fault that it happened – just like Ron felt! And Ron was so withdrawn when we first saw him – he barely spoke to us for a year, and he was only just six and it was a damned thing to happen to anyone, but to a kid...*

*And Neville was just a kid then too, only eleven. Would I have been able to stand up to You-Know-Who last year? Or even this year? Or even ten, twenty years from now? He’s You-Know-Who. You just can’t stand up to him, and it’s not your fault, not that you’re weak, but just that he’s so strong. That’s why they fought against him for eleven years and why everyone’s still scared stiff of him. Neville’s only a kid too, like I am even though I don’t want to be, and how the hell would he be able to fight him?*

*But Neville thinks he should have – cause he’s the Boy-who-Lived, isn’t he? But maybe he just lived because of a fluke or something, maybe he’s only just a normal boy, like I’m normal but no one knows*



*and they all expect him to do extraordinary stuff and he can't, and everyone has such high expectations that... oh hell. I had high expectations! I thought he'd just bounce back up after Quirrell and we'd be tight together again, but you just can't go through some stuff without some... after-effects. No wonder he didn't answer me all summer – he wanted to be alone, to think, to sort out stuff all alone.*

*And... and I don't need a diary to figure him out, because, after all, he's my Neville.*

“Are you even listening to him?” Draco’s taciturn voice cut through her thoughts. She turned towards him and bestowed a radiant smile.

“You aren’t, are you?” Neville asked, looking slightly skeptical of the authenticity of her smile.

“Of course not, you lovable, old teddy bear,” she said fondly, without thinking. Draco made a gagging sound, looking a little sick, and even Neville regarded her warily.

“Did you swallow Essence of Insanity or a Babbling Beverage?” Draco demanded. “Or are your brains just permanently addled? It could be hereditary of course – Muggles aren’t exactly known for their ingenuity.”

Rose ignored him as before. “Forget it all,” she said tenderly. “I don’t care about that damned diary, Nev.”

“Well, I do,” Neville said. “Are you alright?”

“Never better,” she said brightly.

The unspoken aura of *I don't believe you, not one bit* hung around Draco. “Well,” Neville said quickly, “Let’s get back to the story and how Draco and Dobby fit in it and then you can decide what you want to do with the diary.”

“Proceed,” Rose said serenely, picking up a muffin from her neglected breakfast plate and popping it whole into her mouth.

“Well, I decided to investigate the diary more because it seemed suspicious, so when you asked me about it last night, I still had it. Remember that room with the huge pink sofas and pictures of ladies in hoopskirts Ron found in March? After dinner I took the diary and went there. It was empty. I lit the fire and was just turning the pages of the diary, sort of thinking about what to do. Then something popped and the next thing I knew, Dobby was in front of me.

You have to realize, I never told *anyone* about Dobby visiting me in the summer – not Gran, not you, not Ron, not even Draco. And I knew Dobby was the Malfoys’ house-elf, too. So, he popped up and I said hello and asked him what he wanted. He looked at the diary and me, all tearily, and asked me for pardon, he’d done something wrong. I put down the diary and asked him why pick me to tell and he started off on how horrible his masters are, how friendless he is – typical tear-wrencher, but it was kind of wearing thin cause he’d already told me the same things before. And I went on saying ok, ok, could you hurry, I’m a bit busy and he finally sobbed and gasped out that it was him who’d stopped me from entering the Platform.”

“And you didn’t doubt him?” Rose asked, suddenly skeptical again. “A puny house-elf? Come on, I doubt even a single grown wizard could have sealed the entire platform – I mean, wouldn’t that involve complex magic?”

It was Draco who spoke up this time, the quiet assurance of one who knew what he was talking about in his voice. “House-elves have powerful magic of their own,” he said matter-of-factly. “One of Grandmother Druella’s best friends, long ago, was in the Unit of Advanced Research on Magical Creatures – bureau of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures – and she used to tell Grandmother stuff. Not like wizards’ magic, of course, – I think she said theirs was more... primal, but that it’s all tripe what wizards say about elves and centaurs and all not being as strong as us. And Dobby, whatever else you can say about him, was a hard-worker when he felt like it. Lazy, sure, but still when he was driven, he could work harder than even Jip and Twinkle.”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “Just what he said.” She saw the two of them exchange a warm look and, for a moment, she felt a little left out. Then Neville smiled at her and suddenly, she felt a whole lot better.

“You were saying...” Rose prompted him, returning his smile.

“Oh right – so Dobby said he’d sealed the platform. Being the gullible, young fellow I am, I didn’t start questioning the technicalities of the matter and believed him. Of course, I was mad and I yelled at him asking if he was crazy, did he know the hassle I’d gone through and so forth. He just stared at me through those huge tennis-ball eyes and said in this totally *sepulchral*...”

“Sepulchral?” Draco interrupted, looking confused.

“Gloomy,” Rose interpreted. “Sepulchral just sounds nicer.”

“Totally sepulchral voice, ‘But tis for Master’s own good!’ And then, he just clicked his fingers and the book flew into his hands and before I could do anything, he’d vanished with it.” Neville leaned back and said, “That’s the end. It’s your turn now, Draco.”

Looking sulky, Draco picked up from where he’d left. “I was informed of the matter at nine o’ clock,” he said stiffly. “Naturally, I was at first dubious but when backed up by corroborative evidence on Dobby’s scandalizing untruthfulness – he is quite well noted for it –, I was able to verify the authenticity of the events described.”

*And this really isn’t a court of trial, you know. No need for the formality.*

“As it involves inappropriate behavior on the part of one of my staff, it naturally involves me. Neville and I developed a war strategy to tackle the shockingly disgraceful creature and retrieve the diary. Funnily enough, when described, I was able to verify that the book described was the one gifted by me to *you*.” He glowered at Rose.

“Which,” Neville said, “Begs many, many questions.”

*Oh yeah. Like how full the Malfoys are of sin, blackness, and iniquity. Where did Draco get that diary? Did it really possess Neville? It’s*

*dark then, isn't it? I mean, it's pretty strange that I couldn't get rid of it in any way – drowning, burning, cutting, stomping – this summer, the way it's able to understand whether it's a hot day or a moonlit night or when the bell's ringing. Yeah... it could be dark.*

“But,” Draco said, “We won’t get into that, not right now.” He resumed his stiff, formal tone, as he said, “I have notified my mother by owl. Rest assured, you shall have your diary back soon, and that Dobby shall be very severely punished.” A wicked light gleamed in his eyes as he said, reverting to his normal tone, “He’s had it coming to him for years.”

“Oh yes,” Neville said, nodding sagely. “From what Draco’s told me, Dobby’s always considered himself a bit of a... free agent. He dropped Draco as a baby several times – he was finally caught at it by Mrs Malfoy, and then expelled from the nursery.”

*So that explains why Draco's so... um, weird. Or maybe weird is an understatement?*

“He once killed one of the albino peacocks on their estates. Devoured it too, apparently.”

“Can you believe,” Draco asked scornfully, “He said he was *hungry*. The traitorous sprig – well, now he’s gone a step too far. He deserves the ultimate punishment – for robbery and libel!”

“Libel?” Rose asked confusedly.

“Blackening our name and reputation,” Draco spat, looking quite overwhelmed with rage. He stood up and nodded to Neville, “I’m off, now that my job is done. I’ll be in the dorms if you need me – I’ve a foot left on Binns’ essay.” He patted Neville’s shoulder, the gesture one of easy, old camaraderie.

“Finish your breakfast,” Neville told Rose lazily. “Is it really true that you bullied Smith into making that poster today?” It was remarkable how quickly he could go back to being normal.

“Yes,” Rose said absently, nibbling on a bit of her omelet. Before he could say anything else, she suddenly asked him, “Do you like Draco?”

Neville looked at her, surprised. “I should think so, seeing as he’s my friend,” he said finally, looking unsure what to make of her. “Unless you meant it in that...”

“Um, no,” Rose said, suddenly having a vision of Neville and Draco kissing each other. She shuddered – it was a very, very yucky vision. Neither of them was particularly hot. “I just meant,” she said quickly, “whether you really liked him, as a, well, you know... friend.”

“I don’t get you.”

Rose toyed with her food, looking down. “Would you throw him or me out of a car, moving at ninety miles per hour, straight towards a house, when you knew you couldn’t drive the car to safety?” she asked softly.

Neville winced. It had come down to that, five years ago. The infamous Car Incident. Rose had been curious about cars. So had Neville. So had Ron. She’d only been seven, supremely confident in her own powers. Muggles were stupid, she’d reckoned. So why couldn’t a smart, seven-year-old witch drive one of their funny metal cages? It looked like fun. Neville had agreed with her idea and they’d both bothered Ron until he’d reluctantly agreed to go along with the idea. Ron had selected a nice, cute, shiny, blue car – Rose and Neville had let him choose the car, magnanimously, even though Rose would have preferred the large, red sports car and Neville a sleek, black one. They’d opened the lock with the aid of about twenty hairpins and their own, untrained magic and then...

Well, it had been rough.

“You, of course,” Neville said matter-of-factly. “Then Ron, then Ginny, and then Draco.”

“You haven’t mentioned yourself,” Rose pointed out.

Neville looked at her absently. *An old soul in a young body.* “You wouldn’t give me a chance to,” he said, sounding far away, “If it came to that, you’d probably throw me out first. Then Ron, then yourself.”

“Ginny?” Rose asked.

“She’s a great girl, but there are only so many people you can kill yourself for,” Neville said frankly.

“But you mentioned Ginny!” Rose protested, feeling a little hurt.

“Of course, I did,” Neville said calmly. “Because I would, because I will, if it comes to that. Harry too, and Snidget, and Gran, and your parents, and Uncle Padfoot, and...”

“Are you *planning* to get yourself killed?” Rose snapped, aggrieved. “Making up a list of people you’d save before yourself? God, you sound like a Gryffindor.” She hadn’t meant to make that sound like an insult, but it did. She wondered at herself after making that comment – her parents were Gryffindors, and here she was insulting their house. Smith had permanently soured her against their house.

“Just saying what I feel like,” he said. “Of course, I don’t know how I’ll act like if a situation like that arises. Maybe I’ll be selfish and save myself first. Being the unworthy blighter I am, of course.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Rose said, frustrated. “I try to hold a serious conversation with you and you start ranting and raving within five minutes.”

“Maybe it’s hereditary,” Neville said, sounding gloomy. He yawned and stretched. “Here comes Ginny and her new friend,” he said, motioning towards the red-haired girl and Demelza, who were crossing the room, towards the Slytherin Table. Their hair was wind-ruffled, their faces stinging red from the cold – they’d been outside. “I’ve got a spot of homework to finish too,” he said, and she knew he was lying. He just wanted to be rid of her. “So...” He trailed off and walked away.

Rose felt the urge to hit something, to break something. But Ginny was coming nearer, laughter on her lips, stars in her eyes, her

beautiful hair falling down her pretty face. She'd wonder, she'd ask questions if Rose hit or broke something. And Rose couldn't let her ask any questions. Too many of them had been asked. Questions never seemed to get answered, they led to more questions which just kept on getting piled up, stacked higher, weaving treacherous cobwebs that entangled you within so tightly that you never seemed to find your way out.

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"Seriously, Dem," Ginny laughed, throwing an arm around Demelza's shoulders and pointing at Rose, "That girl is *wicked*." They'd spent the last one-and-a-half hours practicing outside. To be sure, the regulation school brooms were so stupendously awful – they were *cowardly* and refused to fly more than seventy feet above the ground, in spite of their riders' strident urgings – that Demelza wondered why some enterprising student hadn't just upped and revolted against The System and Its 'Brooms' one fine day. After that they'd raced each other, tumbled into huge piles of neatly stacked colorful leaves, giggled at most of the canoodling couples who'd braved the cold to take a sunlit stroll along the lake...

Ginny was fun – more than fun, actually. Demelza liked her a lot, but at the same time, she wondered why pretty, gregarious, funny Ginny Weasley liked her, why she went around with her so much. She could have been best friends with a lot of people and instead, she chose plain, quiet, boyish Demelza Robins. Demelza wasn't used to people her age liking her, or wanting to make friends with her. What she was used to was being the odd one out all the time, the long-limbed, awkward, gangly one, too shy to string more than a few sentences together, who blushed and stammered and became tongue-tied when teachers called on her in class, the one who never fit in, who was always laughed at... It didn't bother her of course, now, she was used to being – and well content – the giraffe. After all, *someone* had to be the odd one out and why not her?

But Ginny... well, a girl like that was never the odd one out. She was always in.

"Let's go beat her up," Ginny suggested, grinning evilly. "Insulting my poor, harmless little-big brother up..."

"Did she really make him write that?" Demelza asked, trying to keep the skepticism out of her voice. "I mean," she said quickly, in answer to Ginny's astonished look, "Well, she's kind of skinny and er..."

"Well, he's skinny too," Ginny said matter-of-factly. "Course she didn't beat him up if that's what you're thinking – not that she couldn't, of course."

"Then?" Demelza demanded.

"Slytherin-ness," Ginny said easily. "You'll find it – you hold her down and I'll punch, and together we'll get the answer out of her even if it costs us Azkaban." Aloud, she yelled, "Hey Rose!"

Rose Potter was fiddling with her very heavily-loaded breakfast plate, her shoulder-length black hair obscuring her face from view. Demelza had just seen her friend, Neville Longbottom, leave the table. At Ginny's shout, she looked up, a rather weak smile on her face. "Hey there, little Virginia," she said, her voice a little tight, when Ginny pounced on her. "Oh, hello – um, Demelza?" She smiled apologetically and waved her hands, "Sorry, this week's been chaos and with all the homework we've got, I'm forgetting *everyone's* names."

"It's okay," Demelza said, plopping down into a seat next to Ginny. She was surprised Rose Potter had even remembered her name at all – before she'd arrived at Hogwarts, most people had seemed to keep on forgetting her name and resorting to 'Giraffe' in place of Demelza.

"You've even forgotten *my* name," Ginny fake-pouted. "Ginevra, remember? After the portrait of that redheaded woman?"

"Virginia," Rose said firmly, biting into a muffin. "As in weak, eternal virgin."

"I rejoice in my virginity," Ginny said comfortably. "It reminds me of how sexy I am." Ginny often said weird things that Demelza couldn't



even begin to understand. She still laughed at them though. She laughed now.

“That was dumb,” Rose said pointedly, nibbling on a strand of hair. Demelza suddenly felt that the comment was pointed towards her – at her sycophantic laugh and general silliness. She blushed and looked down at her hands.

“How’s Ron taking the news?” Rose asked suddenly, still nibbling on her hair.

“Stop doing that to your hair,” Ginny said, “You’ll only get split-ends and then you’ll look even more like a decrepit hag than you already do.”

“Not all of us can be as breathtakingly gorgeous as you, Ginevra. Some of us just have to settle with looking like derelict rats,” Rose said. She sounded dreamy, faraway. “So – how’s Ron taking it?”

“He was laughing about it with Hermione Granger when I last saw him,” Ginny said. “Though Padma Patil looked scandalized and kept on shaking her head and going on about how unethical it was of you – Michael Corner said something about Anthony Goldstein...”

“Oh?” Now Rose laughed. Demelza had made a study of laughs. They sounded different for different people, reminded you of different things. Ginny’s laugh reminded her – strangely enough – of long sunlit afternoons curled up with a cat and a book on Quidditch. Rose’s made her think of a lone, dark-leaved tree on top of a hill swaying its slender branches in time to a cool, spring wind. “Padma would – she’s such a prude. Hermione was laughing? Nice point in her favor.”

“She’s not a bad sort,” Ginny said, “She helped us with a bit of our Potions homework last week. Just a bit too fussy – but she’s good for Ron.”

“Mmm?” Rose turned slightly dazed eyes towards them. It was clear that she hadn’t been listening.

“Rose? Rose Iris Potter?” Ginny asked, slapping her shoulder.

“*Iris*?” Demelza gasped. “Doesn’t that make her initials –”

Rose came back to life with a jerk. She nodded her head sagely, “Oh yeah – R.I.P. Rest in Peace. My parents were under considerable duress before I was born so, yes, I think they deserve to be excused. Besides, it’s not like I’m named, oh, I don’t know...”

“Albus Severus Potter?” Ginny suggested, giggling.

Demelza and Rose joined her in laughing.

“Well, you never know, one of your nephews could be named that!” Ginny protested. Aside, she added, “Her little brother, Harry, has the worst taste in picking names. When Rose’s mum was pregnant last year, one of the names he suggested for a boy was – you’ll never guess – *Serpentium Aurelius Jack Rococo!*”

“He’s only seven,” Rose said diplomatically. “Going to be eight this November.”

“Pretty big age gap,” Demelza commented, “Nearly five years right?”

“Five years isn’t long,” Rose said, looking shocked.

“Not for you it isn’t,” Ginny snorted. “Remember my family?” Rose and Demelza – who’d heard rumors of what had happened to the Weasley family – both stiffened, but Ginny carried on blithely. “Seven kids in ten years.”

“Six pregnancies only – one was a pair of twins,” Rose reminded her. “But still, it’s shorter than mine. My little sister, Sni- oh sorry, Violet, is practically twelve years younger than me.”

“I’d forgotten she was called Violet,” Ginny said. “We all just call her Snidget – she’s simply adorabalicious, send us more pictures, Rose.”

“Rose? Violet?” Demelza asked, beginning to sense a pattern.

Now Rose grinned. “Oh yes,” she smiled, “Ever since Great-Great Grandma Pansy, Great-Grandma Daisy, Grandma Iris...” She pushed

away her plate – still nine-tenths filled. “Any chance I’ll find Ron in the library?”

“Unlikely,” Ginny said. “He said he had some letters to read and write. About... you know.”

“Oh,” Rose said, standing up, “Oh. Well, you wouldn’t be interested in Quidditch would you?”

“I’m *exhausted*,” Ginny protested, but Demelza leaped at the chance to play with the so-called-*brilliant* Rose Potter.

“I’ll play!” she said enthusiastically, “Though I don’t have a broom of course...”

“I’ll use a regulation broom,” Rose said quickly, “It wouldn’t be fair for me to expect you to compete against a Nimbus with one of those relics. Come on, we’ll pilfer an old Snitch from the store-room.” There was a restless look in her eyes, and she was still nibbling her hair. But Demelza knew that she was going to be thoroughly trounced when Rose suddenly smiled, mischief lighting up her emerald-green eyes to fever-pitch brightness. “You are so going to *lose*.”

She did of course, five points to Rose’s thirteen.

**A/N: Thank GOD my exams are finally over! Now I have a whole free week until the results come in – plenty of time to brush up on my fanfic-reading-and-writing time! Everyone, please plug one of your fics in a review – I’m in a very ready mood! I promise to review – and if you want, give constructive criticism!**

## **Past, Present and Future**

*It is not my job to tell you what is right and what is wrong, so I will simply say this: do what you think is right. Though it may not always be the right thing, it is the best you can do. True, the world always seems to demand more than you can give. If that's the case, then screw the world. As exemplified by this list, Slytherins make and live by their own rules and nothing they can do is going to change that.*

### **An Altered Destiny: The Beginning, if there is one by: Insane Slytherin**

“Thank you, Druella,” Rodolphus Lestrangle said courteously; reaching out for the iridescent, sea-shell-shaped, mother-of-pearl teacup his mother-in-law offered him. “I’m quite flattered that you still remember how partial I am to Macha tea.”

“No trouble at all,” Druella Black said, smiling as sweetly as a young girl, and handing out another similar cup to Lucius Malfoy who murmured his thanks. She spread out her arms and the ruby bracelet on her alabaster-white wrist flashed red by the golden candle-light, while her sapphire-blue eyes glimmered. “After all, I’m only an old, decrepit woman now,” she sighed theatrically, mischief in her smile. “And as it’s quite beyond me now to aspire to beauty, I can always be a charming, gracious hostess, can’t I?”

“The most charming of them all,” Lucius said chivalrously. Privately, Rodolphus thought it execrably bad taste of her to draw attention so ostentatiously to her Fountain-of-Youth-esque beauty. Druella Rosier Black – old and decrepit? Oh yes, she must be in her seventies now, but no one would have said that, looking at her. She seemed a strikingly handsome woman in her mid-forties – really rather scandalously young, sometimes, to be the mother of Narcissa and Bellatrix. Of course, her beauty was most likely artificial now – she was a Metamorphagus, knew how to apply cosmetics, and was an inexcusably vain narcissist (ironic seeing as she’d named her favorite daughter *Narcissa*) – but she’d always been very lovely.

*Calixta Rookwood’s daughter*, he thought, smiling reminiscently as he remembered the heady, turbulent days of his youth – when he’d written fiery sonnets to a radiantly beautiful woman twice his age (and

who was, by some twisted vagary of fate, his crazy wife's grandmother). Rodolphus was only a few years younger than Druella herself. He still remembered her at school – the haughty Ice Princess, who swept through the corridors of Hogwarts like a bitter draught – the second youngest daughter, Dorea (the youngest had been Walburga in those days), and youngest son, Cygnus (who was only a few months younger than his Aunt Dorea), of the House of Black always at her side. Narcissa had nothing on her mother, as those who'd seen both women in their youth might have said.

But Druella was old now and she'd lost so much it was a wonder she held her head so high, so haughtily, as if the world was still bowing before her (even though it wasn't). What was a beautiful woman without her worshippers? What was a woman without her lover and friend? What was a mother without her daughters?

Lucius was speaking and reluctantly, Rodolphus tore himself away from his thoughts. He felt so old. Sometimes he wished he was in Bella's place – that his life was forfeit, not hers. Not of course that he loved her, or even respected or admired her. Just that, over the years, he'd become – without ever suspecting it – rather fond of her. Like she was a foolish, gamboling kitten he had to protect from harming herself. Death didn't look so bad, on the wrong side of sixty, after he'd lost his health, a great deal of his wealth (he could never forgive himself for not securing his assets and inheritance – for Romulus' sake), peace of mind, friendship...

He had nothing now except his books, Romulus, and some dusty old memories he never cared to think about.

Druella's eyes were rather narrow over her cup and her mouth was set hard. "She tried to kill me," she said coldly, interrupting Lucius.

*Her daughter's lips twitched in fury and her face was very white. Her wand quivered threateningly and she hissed, "You have no idea what I can do, there's nothing I wouldn't do anymore..."*

*But Druella only laughed, and Bellatrix was reminded vividly of glass shattering. "Bella, your own mother? You wouldn't –"*

*Her mouth opened in a soundless gasp as she was thrown off her settee with a violence that made her skid several feet and slam into a wall.*

*“Nothing I wouldn’t do,” Bellatrix repeated, every bit as pale as her mother. She rose from her chair, wand drawn. Druella lay quite still underneath the picture of the angel, eyes shut, and for a stomach-lurching moment Bellatrix wondered whether she had killed her mother. Then her long lashes trembled and she half-dragged herself into a sitting position against the wall. She fumbled for a moment, and then her own wand was in her trembling fingers.*

*Bellatrix stood ready, she expected a duel now. A duel with her own mother.*

*But, to her surprise, Druella threw the wand away. It fell soundlessly on the thick rose-bedecked carpet, in front of Bellatrix’s feet. “No,” her mother whispered, looking very ill, “No, Bellatrix, I won’t fight you. Not one of my own daughters.” She clutched the wall and rose unsteadily. “Kill me if you will. If you can.”*

*Bellatrix raised her wand and looked into her mother’s blue eyes. “Avada Kedavra,” she whispered.*

*“In January, in fact,” Druella was saying, her slender fingers very white against her iridescent tea-cup. “Why tell me all this? The fewer who know, the better.”*

*“We wanted to spare you,” Lucius was saying patiently. “Cissy asked us —”*

*“You told Narcissa? Good grief, what’s this world coming to!” Druella said, looking agitated. “Boys will be boys, I know,” she murmured, looking over at Lucius, who was in his forties, disapprovingly, “but that was absurdly foolhardy of you. What if you’re questioned, hmm? Aurors...” She frowned, “they’re known to be rough.”*

*“Why should we be questioned?” Rodolphus sighed, saving Lucius. “Without a shard of evidence — I’ll bring down my books and we’ll discuss the finer points of Detainment under Civil Order, Purposes of State, Article 59, someday.”*

"I won't argue with you," Druella said coolly, "I'm just a foolish, old woman. I was brought up to be a charming hostess, a lovely wife, and a good mother – nothing else. But have neither of you heard of a little concept called, oh, I don't know, *keeping quiet*? Next, you'll be telling Draco." She caught the guilty look in Lucius' eyes and groaned, actually burying her head in her hands and muttering curses under her breath.

"Only when he's older – not until he's fifteen, at least!" Lucius said defensively. "He ought to know what happened to his aunt..."

"Fifteen?" Druella looked up and practically snorted, but restrained herself just in time. Ladies did not snort. Seventy years ago, Druella had thought that ladies never got to do anything fun. Now, she still thought the same thing.

"A child! And you want to tell him about that hellion? His firebrand aunt's best left within the covers of pretty family albums, to look back at but never to speak of. *She killed children*," Druella hissed. "Innocent children who hadn't done a thing – I won't say a thing about killing their parents, the Weasleys deserved to die – besmirching their blood in such an uncouth manner – and perhaps the Bones' and Smiths too. But those little ones as well? The youngest Bones was three, wasn't he? *Three years old*, Rodolphus, Lucius!"

"Bellatrix couldn't –"

"Oh, don't tell me she couldn't control herself!" Druella snapped, running her slim, bejeweled fingers agitatedly through her elegantly pinned-up hair. "What was she born a Black for – if she couldn't learn self-restraint? Blood will tell in the end and the spirits of the children she killed will haunt her, someday."

She spoke with such conviction that Lucius looked a little nervous. Rodolphus however raised his eyes skeptically. "You don't actually believe that hog- I mean, those old superstitions?"

"I believe what I was brought up to believe," Druella said gravely. "Yes, our oldest family trees grow diseased over time, and yes, it is our duty to rid ourselves of the canker, so that new branches and

buds can blossom forth. We must prune them – but tear them away completely?”

“Three children still left,” Lucius said. “Though they shouldn’t have been, of course.”

Druella looked disgusted. “Three alive, six dead – and if you had your way, nine dead.” She shook her head.

“Would you prune it, if you had a chance?” Rodolphus asked, suddenly remembering something. It had happened over twenty years ago, in the Dark Lord’s hey-day, a prime chance to rid the world of canker – in an indirect sort of way – and Druella Black had prevented it. For what? “The world of festering branches? Would you prune it, if you had a chance?” he elaborated.

“Certainly,” Druella said calmly. “Without harming innocent children, of course. And I would have taken precautions not to get myself caught.”

Her eyes sparkled and she remembered a wild night, over fifty years ago, when she’d joined Cygnus on her mother’s Deathday Revels, uncontrollable rage in her heart. The heady feeling of power when she’d held the wand and let herself go, stopped thinking, gone mad – the laughter (drunken), the drunkenness (and, oh dear, the vulgarity of it all), the exquisite pleasure (of course, Cygnus had proposed soon afterwards, being the gentleman he was), and the horror the day afterwards, when she’d recovered from her first, last, and only hangover. *Three Muggles*.

“What about Dorea?” Rodolphus asked softly, knowing Lucius wouldn’t understand. He’d only been a lad then, and besides, it had been Bella’s business mainly. And, of course, Lucius and Bella never interfered in each other’s business, if they could help it.

“Dorea?” Druella asked, her eyes softening at once. “Black? What about her?”

“Why did you let her go?” Rodolphus said, smiling. “We could have gotten rid of her son. James Potter. And then, of course, he wouldn’t be breeding half-blood brats all over the place.”



Druella's nostrils flared dangerously. "I did no such thing," she said icily. "I wasn't a part of your organization – what influence could I have had? She was released by right of her blood and because she was a woman of impeccable virtue, neutral to your cause."

"Our? Not your cause as well?" Rodolphus asked smiling.

"My husband's and mine," Druella said curtly, as if she was unwilling to say 'mine' of a cause that demanded the brutal sacrifice of children. "I had no influence, as I repeat, over her being released early."

"Only the influence of a mother over a daughter, who hadn't gone completely wild then," Rodolphus said calmly. "You two were always quite intimate at Hogwarts, and even afterwards, when she lost her mind and was sent to St. Mungo's."

"She recovered," Druella quickly pointed out.

"Four years later. And then severed ties as quickly as she could with the bloodline that had bequeathed it's madness to her – wasn't she engaged to Orion at one point in time?"

"She didn't want any more inbreeding – she would have been marrying her own brother's son. Still, Orion married Walburga and even though they were second cousins, their sons both turned out appallingly enough, didn't they? Quite a lesson to anyone on the dangers of inbreeding – imagine what would have happened if Orion had married his own aunt. It would have been even worse."

"But she didn't have to join the Ministry like a vulgar Mudblood, did she? She could have just fallen back on her inheritance and lived like a lady of society – which she was, by dint of birth... wasn't she?" Rodolphus smiled mischievously, feeling pleasure at dredging up the dusty scandals of the past, shameful rumors that had been laid peacefully to rest over half-a-century ago, things nobody ever talked about because they'd been forgotten for so many years.

"Her mother and father were quite old when she was born – wonder at all that she was ever born. Why, she was nearly twenty years younger than Cassiopeia Black, the next in the family – unless you count Marius the Squib and he was still sixteen years older. Pollux

Black – that’s her oldest brother – was said to be quite close with his cousin Lycoris, and goodness knows she never married, though she was accounted a great beauty and...”

“She was the daughter of Cygnus Black and Violetta Bulstrode,” Druella said flatly. “Not Pollux and Lycoris Black. The Blacks aren’t *that* inbred that the youngest girl in the family would be – quite literally – her brother’s daughter. Pollux and Lycoris – why it’s like linking together Sirius and Bellatrix – or rather, Narcissa – and assuming they had Draco! A thousand pardons, Lucius.”

“No offense taken,” Lucius said, looking a little bored. Those things had happened years before he’d been born, long before he’d even been thought of, when Abraxas Malfoy was too busy producing bastards with blood-trash to be thinking about creating heirs with women of his own station.

Rodolphus looked at him, at his long, shining blond hair pulled back into a ponytail (that Lucius and Narcissa apparently both considered debonair – he himself considered it archaic and effeminate), smooth, unlined face (still a little boyish), and at his cool, steel-chip eyes, so like little Draco’s. Innocent, little Draco, who had the funniest notions about right and wrong, and the War, and blood. Innocent, little Draco, who would not be so little soon, and who might not even be innocent much longer – if his darling Auntie Bella continued her mad escapades. *He’s so young*, he thought, thinking both of father and son. And then he considered it absurd that he was calling a grown man of forty, young. It was just that... well, he felt old.

“Right,” he said quickly, back to business. “We’d best be leaving right now – work to be done, Druella.” He set down his iridescent tea-cup.

Lucius looked like he wanted to say *Thank Merlin – finally!* But he managed to restrain himself.

“Don’t you think,” Druella said hesitantly, clearly unsure of the ground she was treading. “Well, that it’s too early to be applying the Imperius Curse – I mean, won’t it wear off? Won’t you be suspected?”

“We have an honor guard,” Lucius said evasively. “We’ll be careful to cover our tracks.”

"I should hope so," Druella said rather severely. "Not for your sake, of course, you naughty boy, but for your poor wife and son." She smiled – very coquettishly for a woman over seventy – and extended her hand so that Lucius, who'd just stood up and bowed, could kiss it. He kissed the tips of her dainty fingers gracefully and she smiled delightfully.

*Ever the ladies' man*, Rodolphus thought wryly, shaking hands with Druella, instead of kissing her fingers. She smiled for him too and then, suddenly, did something he would never have expected of her. She stood up on tip-toe, her stiff silk skirts rustling, and kissed his cheek. "Stay safe," she whispered, squeezing his plump fingers with her own slim ones.

He looked down in surprise into her eyes and found sadness there, deep, unanswerable, unquestioning.

*What was a woman without her lover and friend? What was a mother without her daughters?*

Tiredness too, reciprocated in his own eyes. Only memories left of an age that had passed long ago.

"I will," he said, his voice as low as hers. "I will."

*Because we're one of the few still left.*

**000**

*My precious,*

*I was shocked and horrified after receiving your last letter. The world is in grave peril. Whatever gods there are have cast their eyes away from this lowly earth of ours. We are doomed, my beloved son! Anarchy shall triumph and we shall be consigned to the flames of blackest sin and iniquity!*

*Yes, my dear, in answer to your unasked question, I have spent the morning shopping at Twillfitt and Tatting's with Mrs Greengrass and her sister-in-law, Mrs Lestrangle. I have been forced to undergo the humiliation of being told – quite snidely, I might add – by Madame*

*Schaller that I am no longer eligible for Size 00 robes, and that I would be well advised to try Size 0. And in front of Lyra LeStrange, no less, whose waist is roughly the size of a thicker-than-average toothpick! (I do believe that woman uses slimming robes – it is simply impossible for her waist to be naturally nineteen inches, even if she is only five feet tall).*

*Speaking of Lyra, how is her son getting along at school? She assures me that he writes to say that he's quite well and the faculty have been most cooperative – but does Romulus have much of a social life? Or friends at all? Being mute can be quite a sad disability, but there is really nothing the poor child can do. I do pity him.*

*Cassiopeia and Lyra together – drama queens, both them! Naturally Madame Schaller Adores (with a capital A) Lyra – she kept on saying, “Oh but my darling, how splendidly you've kept your figure! Are you quite sure this Size 000 isn't too loose for you? We haven't a smaller size, I'm afraid – most women nowadays are so disproportionately built...”*

*She looked at me when she said “disproportionately built”. Fat – she was calling ME, Narcissa Calixta Black Malfoy FAT! But really, I'm a grown woman with a twelve-year-old son – and seven inches taller than that twig of a Lyra, I might add – and it's quite impossible for me to whittle down to anything less than my present weight. Your father advises me not to.*

*I've digressed quite far from our original topic, haven't I? A thousand pardons, sweetheart. You know how I do tend to ramble, under stress. After all, you're the only one I can safely ramble to. Blacks and Malfoys simply do not ramble in public.*

*Yes, we are under quite a lot of stress. Arranging all your aunt's legal affairs – don't worry about her, dear, she'll be fine – , your grandmother's finances, the new estates my Aunt Walburga left us last year... all that publicity about the case is detrimental to your father's career at the Ministry, and he's working very hard to do the best he can about it nowadays... your Uncle Rodolphus has also entrusted his estates – which shall be Romulus' one day – to our superior management (under a little fee of course), and since your*

*father's busy with his own work, I'm left with managing most of our finances (I simply do not trust Stock Analysts, they're all vultures).*

*Your wife shall never measure up to your father's wife, darling, no matter who you marry. The girls nowadays are so dreadfully... bland. I do not approve of that Parkinson chit as a suitable wife for you – though Mrs Parkinson is quite keen on the idea – so do all you can to discourage her attentions. Daphne Greengrass is, I suppose, the ideal candidate. She'll be pretty if she takes after the Lestranges – her mother, Cassiopeia, was Rodolphus and Rabastan's sister – but she'll be hideous if she resembles the Greengrasses. Her blood is pure and she's fairly rich, but she's, quite frankly, a dull boor. Even Pansy Parkinson is more colorful than her.*

*Never mind about your wife. You have twenty years left to choose one – though I warn you, if you haven't chosen one by then I shall have to choose for you. I didn't wish to disturb your father with your letter, so I've hunted down that diary of yours myself. Don't mention the affair to your father, please, it would worry him. I, certainly, haven't said anything. The elf was unsuccessful in his attempts to destroy it – I asked Jip what he'd been doing with it all this time and Jip told me that he'd spent most of his time trying to annihilate it.*

*Rest assured, the elf shall be punished. Severely. I shall ask mother's advice as to the best way to deal with him. Mother can be quite... creative when it comes to punishment. Certainly not as much as your aunt, but fairly well. I am dreadfully unimaginative.*

*Don't eat too many sweets or you'll be accused of being "disproportionately built" by some snide shopkeeper one fine day, do your homework everyday, avoid Pansy Parkinson, have a lot of fun and take care.*

*Love,*

*Mother*

**000**

Bellatrix would gladly have squandered a few thousand Galleons for some non-elf company. She wasn't even picky – Aurors who would

willingly have her burned alive, her mother, Rodolphus, a sociable albino peacock or two – just about anyone. The only visitors she had been permitted to receive for the last month had been the house-elves – who brought up meal trays to her tower, thrice a day –, the mute (at least she assumed he was, considering that he never even opened his mouth when he was in her presence) Auror who accompanied them – and her attorney, once a week.

The house-elves were meek and terrified – befitting their station, of course – and besides, you couldn't hold a conversation with a *servitor*. Positively disgraceful – why even Andromeda and Sirius had been above that sort of thing. Funnily enough, though, Cissy – of all people – had always been quite chatty with their house-elves – at least until Mother found out and generously applied an oak pointer to her back. It had been the first, last, and only time Druella Black ever whipped her youngest daughter, who being her mother's favorite, was generally always exempt from the punishments her older sisters received.

Nobody ever believed Bellatrix when she told them that she'd frequently been whipped as a child. The thought of beautiful, elegant, silver-tongued Druella Black whipping a child! You'd have expected her sister-in-law, Old Walburga, who'd been called old even when she was a young woman in her twenties, to whip her boys – and goodness knows, that young scoundrel of a Sirius Black needed it for the good of his soul – but Druella?

The world went by contraries – Druella had never verbally abused her daughters (unless you counted the letter she sent Andromeda after receiving news of her marriage). But her beatings... well, even now, Bellatrix – who was quite used to pain by the time she was in her mid-teens – couldn't think of them without wincing. Walburga never laid a hand – or very infrequently, a wand – on her sons, even though they received plenty of her tongue-lashings.

*Yes, the world is certainly very odd*, Bellatrix thought detachedly, staring out of her window. She felt like the Lady of the Tower – the protagonist of the story of the same name in *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. The Lady had apparently been divinely beautiful with long, flowing tresses the hue of the earth and inexpressibly melancholy

eyes of 'palest azure.' Andromeda had smirked when Mother read the story aloud to all three of them and said that she looked like the Lady because she had brown hair and the palest eyes of all three of them. She'd lived in a tower of pure ivory – *is it possible to hew a tower entirely of ivory?* – with a lotus-shaped roof and kept a pack of flying greyhounds and albino parrots – *perhaps that's where the Malfoys' got the idea about cultivating a flock of albino peacocks.*

A powerful enchanter had locked her up in her tower when she was a child, and then simply upped and left – *pedophile and scared of commitment.* She'd enchanted men to her lonely tower in the midst of a deep, dark, gloomy forest by the power of her melodious voice – *was she a siren too?* Her flying greyhounds would transport the men to her high tower, and there, enthralled in her spell, they would do her bidding. There, she sliced their throats and ate them up – reserving certain *special* portions of the body for her precious parrots of course. She'd cut out their eyes and she'd collect them in a mother-of-pearl chest.

The – admittedly gruesome – fairy tale ended in a handsome prince arriving one day, her falling in love with him, him finding her mother-of-pearl chest and slaying her and her parrots and greyhounds, and then doing some mumbo-jumbo to bring back the slain men to life – using their collected eyes, of course. At the end of the story, Mother had murmured, "*Femme fatale*" and Andromeda, almost reduced to tears, had gasped out that she didn't want to look like the Lady of the Tower; she'd dye her hair black if she had to...

Her hair had grown darker – almost as black as Bellatrix's – over the years but in the end, she'd ended up dying her hair a nondescript, light brown hue, to lessen the resemblance between her and her family. *Blood will up in the end*, Bellatrix had thought sagely when her mother had told her about Andromeda's new hair color, by way of conversation. And it had in the end – Andromeda's daughter had been born with ink-black hair and steely blue eyes, like the Blacks, and a Metamorphagus, like her aunt and grandmother.

*I'm going mad – thinking about that little blood traitor and her brat. Sweet Morgana, it must be uncomfortable going insane. If I'm not*

*careful, I'll end up like Great-Aunts Cassiopeia, Lycoris and Dorea, Grandmother Calixta... not a very good bloodline for sanity, is it?*

Today was the, let's see... twenty-sixth of September. Exactly five weeks of house imprisonment, being cut off from society and human interaction, wine, Bertie Botts' Every-Flavor-Beans, three rooms full of beautiful clothes and jewelry, libraries... It seemed so much longer.

The clock struck twelve o' clock and she thought absently that the house-elf would arrive soon with lunch. And, then she was expecting her attorney, from four to eight. She got up and stretched restlessly. She hadn't bothered changing into normal clothes today – who was there to see her? Only Elgerling – her attorney – and he would enjoy the sight of her in a lacy, white negligee, a cream over-robe thrown carelessly over it.

*I'd better make my will, today. I might forget next week. The trial is on the 16th of October – why do they still let him visit me? She pondered over that for a moment. Ah yes, of course, they want to give it the appearance of a fair trial. Crouch will want to broadcast this case – get his money's worth of hiring that little Ramsey chit and her expensive technologies – I wouldn't be surprised if international newspapers are picking up on this as well. Brutal murders, innocent children, the Dark Lord, deranged and deadly men and women who were never caught, and a clever, little girl – and she's only in her late twenties – engineering the whole operation... yes, it's certainly worthy of being in the headlines for a few weeks. They might even write a book on it – the Weasley-Smith-Bones case. Of course, they'd have to get a catchier name for it – but still, it'd be well worth the money, if say, Rita Skeeter, wrote it.*

It was no use, of course, for her to worry over that. The trial was scheduled to begin on the 16th of October. It would end in a week or so – a sentence of *public* execution would be pronounced on them all (the first time it had been pronounced in over a hundred and fifty years), the children would receive vast sums of money and suffer notoriety for many months... She wasn't ready to endure the disgrace of a public execution. How would Cissy feel? Draco? Mother? And, besides, she was too busy to be dying right now, thank you very much. She had better things than to suffer an ignominious death by



being pitched through The Veil in the Department of Mysteries, in a chamber packed with gaping eyewitnesses. If she had to die she'd die fighting for what she believed in – a laugh on her lips and a wand in her hand.

*Yes, I'll make my will. I do wish they'd let me have some parchment. Or books. Or anything at all, really.* She stared around at her room gloomily – small, sunless, with a single, small, magically-sealed, latticed window. The enchantments preventing her from escaping were so thick that they were almost tangible. Sometimes she felt like she could see them – sparks flickering in the air for a moment and then disappearing, trapping her inside, an eagle in a too-small cage. It was bare, except for a bed, a table, two chairs, and a fireplace.

Not even a mirror. Mother wouldn't have been able to survive for more than a few minutes in this room. Cissy wouldn't have been able to survive for more than a few hours. Even Bellatrix – who'd never cared much about her beauty – was reaching the end of her tether. There was a knocking sound and Bellatrix, out of sheer force of habit, searched for the door before remembering, half a second later, that there *was* no door. The position of the entrance to her little jail changed every few minutes – one of the sneering Aurors had informed her of that, so it wouldn't be of much use for her to try to escape – and was invisible.

“Enter,” Bellatrix sighed and flopped down on the bed, spreading her legs open. *Damn*, she thought, a fraction of a second later, when a house-elf and four females arrived, by floating through the wall. She crossed her legs disappointedly and surveyed them – she recognized the oldest, thick-browed woman as Ilane Browhatchet, one of the Aurors on Potter's squad. But the younger three – none of whom looked older than twenty – who were they? One – the youngest – was particularly noticeable because of the loose, platinum blond ringlets, streaked with various shades of green – jade, lime, emerald, and olive – that fell below her waist.

“Aurors-in-Training,” Brownhatchet said stiffly, when she noticed Bellatrix staring. “You gave your permission last week for them to survey the conditions.”

“Did I?” asked Bellatrix dreamily, batting her eyelashes at Brownhatchet, who looked away disgustedly. She had, oh yes, indeed, she remembered now – but only because she had been bored. It had been fun, baiting the Auror who had arrived with the contract for her to sign.

The house-elf began setting the plates, knives, and forks on the table. Bellatrix returned the gaze of the girl with the blond-and-green hair. The girl – hardly more than eighteen by the looks of her – looked at her for a second, her gaze strangely imperturbable, and then lowered her eyes. Bellatrix couldn’t believe her eyes – that girl, there was something just so odd about the set of her pale, heart-shaped face, in those slender, unbelievably long fingers resting on her bottle-green robes...

“*Narcissa?*” Bellatrix couldn’t restrain herself from saying.

The girl looked up for a second and Brownhatchet stopped talking. Four pairs of eyes – the youngest girl had looked away – scrutinized her narrowly. The house-elf continued setting the table. Then, Brownhatchet said icily, eyes flashing angrily, “Nymphadora Tonks is one of our youngest trainees, Madame Lestrangle.”

*Tonks?*

Belatedly, she thought, *Well, that would explain the... interesting hair. Goodness, she takes after Cissy, even though she had the Blacks’ coloring as an infant.*

For the first time in her life, she was seeing her only niece in person. She surveyed the girl and the girl, in turn, shifted uncomfortably under Bellatrix’s sharp gaze. Brownhatchet had finished her work – pointing out things that Bellatrix couldn’t see and whispering in a low voice to her trainees – and the elf had finished setting out the food, when Bellatrix suddenly found her voice. Before they all left, she asked, a sweet smile on her face, “And how’s your mother, dearie?”

The girl turned around, a rather frightened look on her face. One of the other girls put an arm around her shoulders, whispering, “It’s nothing, Tonks. Shh.”

*Tonks?* Bellatrix did not expect an answer – not from this half-blood child who would rather go by the surname of the man who sired her, rather than by the honorable, ancient name she had been gifted by her mother. How could you expect the brat of a Mudblood and a blood traitor to be reared up properly?

But Tonks suddenly spoke, – her voice stiff, formal – addressing the aunt she'd been brought up to despise. "Quite well. Thank you."

Bellatrix quickly covered up her surprise with a sardonic grin and a light, "Been brought up well enough to mind your manners, I see. Charming – well, send my regards to your Mummy then. Have a good day, bye-bye."

Tonks couldn't restrain a shudder as she disappeared through the wall, the other girl's arm still around her shoulders.

It took Bellatrix a long time to recover. It was a long time before she could bring herself to the plane of mundane things, like food. For long moments she sat still on her bed, running her hands through her long, coarse black hair, strange thoughts flitting through her mind. Hazy visions, like reflections from a restive pool of water – not clear, not light, but not dark – like, yes, like royal blue ink spilt on marble tiles, staining creamy parchment and a delicate, intricately-embroidered lace shawl, like the crack of Mother's slap when she'd seen the mess. No tears, of course, even though she'd only been four. Black Princesses did not cry – that was for the weak.

Mother was weak. She'd wept for Andromeda. Bellatrix was weak. She'd wept for Regulus. Not like Aunt Walburga.

She touched the large, gold pendant, set with emeralds in the shape of an S, to reassure herself that she wasn't weak. That Aunt Walburga wasn't dead – not in that sense. She was just waiting, a whisper just beyond the consciousness of reality, somewhere far away maybe, but yes, she was waiting. Waiting for her Bella. But it would be a long time before they would be reunited – here, her heart ached with sadness because she *missed* Auntie, missed the long winter nights when the curse of insomnia, plague of the House of Black, would set, and aunt and niece would while away the hours of darkness in reminiscence and spells.

*I have so much to do*, she thought, the familiar feeling of exhaustion taking hold of her, while the hot stew on her table cooled and the strawberry ice cream – she'd specially requested it – melted into a puddle of pink goo. *So very much. And I'm the only one who can do it.* All alone. It was lonely being a survivor, always being a survivor – *Black Princess*, Mother had called her and she'd lowered her eyes respectfully, because princesses – at least Black ones – did not express their pleasure by such trivial tokens as smiles; *Black Phoenix*, He'd called her and she'd laughed, because you could never destroy a phoenix, no matter what you (or she really) did.

*Black Phoenix.*

She smiled sincerely for the first time in months. She spread out her arms and laughed because she wanted to, not for the sake of mockery, but for her own sake, laughed long and loud – the sound ringing like glass bells stirred by a draught in her ears, like she hadn't in years, like a little girl.

*Black Phoenix.*

She liked the sound of it.

**000**

"What are you going to name it?" Liam Turner asked, pointing at the thin golden cat in Harry Potter's arms. The two seven-year-olds were sitting in the Turners' garden, enjoying the last remaining rays of sunlight. They'd been chased out of the kitchen by Mrs. Turner, out of the upper floor by Liam's two older brothers and older sister (and her boyfriend), and out of the living room by Mr. Turner. As they couldn't very well sit in the bathrooms and as Harry's mother had chased him out of his own house, because he was always underfoot (in her words), the only place left was the Turners' garden.

That or the park – which the two had recently been avoiding because Rick Blair – who'd now made his grudge against Harry public – and his gang were fond of frequenting it. It was fairly cold, but Harry liked being cold – a sentiment unshared by his sister who was fond of calling him a freak for it.

“I haven’t decided on a name, yet,” Harry said, stroking The Cat. “I’m waiting for the right name to come up.”

“Waiting?”

“Yep,” Harry nodded, “when it comes, I’ll know. I’ll get a *feeling*.”

Looking skeptical, Liam said, “Maybe you could ask someone else to pick a name? It’s been *forever* since you got it.”

“Him,” Harry said quickly, stroking the cat. “Uncle Padfoot told me. And everyone in the family’s been picking names, but none of them are names for him.”

“What sort of names?”

“Really dumb,” Harry said frankly. “Mummy and Dad said stuff like Matte, Pigeontoes, Candycane, and Jiminy Cricket. Uncle Padfoot went all out and he gave even dumber names – like um... Catharsis, Fried Hamster, Redoubtable Evil, Bumtrinket... I kind-of liked the sound of the last one, but Mummy said I couldn’t name a cat that and yelled at Uncle Padfoot. I think it’s a bad word.”

“You can always call it Goldie,” Liam suggested. “Dad told me that *everyone* names their first pet Goldie – like Beth called Typhoon that when he was a puppy, and Jack had a goldfish named that when he was five, we have a picture of it.”

“I want a cool name for him,” Harry sighed. “If I don’t get a cool name, I won’t call him anything. I might just call him Him.”

“That’s dumb,” Liam said calmly. “You could ask your sister, you know, Rose.”

“Of course I know my sister’s name,” Harry said, with dignity. “And she’d just give us names like Uncle Padfoot – she’s practically Uncle Padfoot, only littler.”

“And she’s a girl too,” Liam felt the need to add. “So, she isn’t exactly Uncle Padfoot.”

“And she’s mean,” Harry said. “But Uncle Padfoot’s always nice.”

“She isn’t mean to me,” Liam said.

“Well, you’re not her little brother,” Harry said sulkily. “She set a billion rabbits on me when I was three. That’s why I don’t like them.”

“No wonder you never want to pet Ruby,” Liam said sagely. “Why don’t you just tell Miss March that you’re scared of rabbits? Then she’ll stop hooting about how rabbits are our friends too and we should love them like we love kittens and candy. ‘Course I hate kittens,” he added, “but Ruby’s sweet.”

“I’m not *scared* of rabbits,” Harry said crossly. “I’m... *allergic* to them, that’s all. Don Carmichael would hoot like anything if I said I was scared of the bloody, little blighters.” He smiled proudly and added, “I just said two swear words.”

“Nothing compared to what Rick Blair told us, remember?” Liam said, wincing at the memory. “I thought you were really brave that day, standing up to him.”

“‘Course I was,” Harry said proudly. He was about to add, *Because I’ll be a Gryffindor some day, like Mummy and Dad. Because I’m as brave as Rose – maybe more, cause she’s in Slytherin, but I know I’ll be in Gryffindor.* But then he remembered that Liam was only a Muggle and he wouldn’t understand and besides, you couldn’t say stuff like that to Muggles. It made him sad to think that they might perhaps never meet – or at least not as best friends – after Harry started Hogwarts and Liam went on to the local secondary.

“Liam,” he asked suddenly. “Will you be my friend forever?”

“Sure,” Liam said easily.

“Promise?” Harry asked.

“‘Course.”

“For ever and ever? Until the end of time?”

“Harry? What’re you-?”

“*Promise?*”

“Alright, okay.”

“Say yes!”

“Fine – yes.”

Harry looked at him, relieved. “That means we’ll always be friends,” he said calmly. *Because we said so.*

“Of course we will!” Liam said just as calmly, as if there could be no doubt about the matter, no doubt at all, reaching out to pet the golden cat, who was staring at both seven-year-olds with remarkably narrow eyes for a cat.

*Because we said so.*

## ***Beyond Veneers***

*“He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long enough into an abyss, the abyss gazes also gazes into you.”*

### **Friedrich Nietzsche**

Personally, Romulus Lestrangle considered Transfiguration class the best lesson on their timetable. Not because he was particularly fond of Professor McDracula and the monumental quantity of homework she bestowed indiscriminately on each and every student, or exactly enamored by the loud-mouthed, trashy, bunch of young Gryffindors they were forced to share the class with. Or even because it was Draco's favorite class – though he considered it his duty to like everything that Draco liked, just because Draco was always so genuinely nice to him (and he'd noticed Draco tended not to be nice with the majority of people he encountered).

It was only because of the fact that he was the best of his year in Transfiguration.

Of course, it wasn't his own skill or magical power that made him the best – Romulus didn't think he was very intelligent, just quick on the uptake, and good at rote memorization. He'd been trained since he was six-years-old in magic by Uncle Rodolphus, to counteract the effects his muteness and partial blindness would pose to his education. At the age of eleven, he was already qualified enough to pass the third-year exams with ease – five years of daily training tended to do that, for one. He wasn't brilliant, just blessed with the best uncle in the whole, wide world.

Thus, he spent most of his lessons finishing the required spells a good half-an-hour in advance, and then staring, bored, at his classmates. Boredom was something he was finding hard to combat at Hogwarts. Asides from his cousins – Daphne, Theodore, and Draco, the teachers, and a few sympathetic older students who'd sigh and pat his head whenever they passed by, he had no one to communicate with. He was mute, yes, but why should that be a problem? Aside from sign language, Uncle Rodolphus had taught him how to inscribe smoky letters that hung in the air with his wand, years



ago. He wasn't a freak or trash, he thought he was just as nice as the average eleven-year-old, maybe he knew a little more than his classmates, but so what? He wasn't asking for much, but a friend would be really, really nice.

*Someone to laugh with in class*, he thought, his eyes straying over to the Gryffindor side of the classroom. There was a very good-looking girl with long, streaming, fiery-red hair, Miss Weasley, who always sat with a tall, awkward-looking girl with short, brown hair and a shy smile. They were quietly laughing over something, and the redhead was pointing at McGonagall's retreating back, a mirthful grin on her face.

*Someone to help*, he thought, watching beautiful Ermelina Tugwood run her fingers, evidently frustrated, through her silky, chestnut curls. There was an intent, concentrating look on her face as she watched red-haired Geoffrey Amberquaffle, who was trying to explain something to her, his hands waving wildly. Who said two Slytherins couldn't be unconditional friends? Em and Geoff – they actually *called* each other that – were more loyal to each other than a pack of unwashed Hufflepuffs ever could be.

*Someone to share secrets with*, he thought, feeling glummer than ever, as he saw Roland Bott and Stalwart Oglethorpe covertly reading *Playwitch* under the table and sniggering. He wished he could get a hold of their magazine. Draco and he used to steal Uncle Rodolphus's monthly edition and read it up in the attic. It had been quite fascinating – especially the pictures. Of course, they'd both received a severe thrashing when Lucius Malfoy had found out – *Soft porn for nine-year-olds! Well, what is this world coming to!*

It hadn't helped matters when Draco protested that he was ten and that even Romulus was a full three months over nine.

"Lestranger?"

He jerked around in surprise and saw that McGonagall had sneaked up on him, while he'd been daydreaming about friends. Romulus hastily straightened and tried to assume a more serious, studious expression. "Yes, Professor?" he asked meekly, as befitted a lowly subject of the Wicked Ice Queen, chastised, as always, by the mere sight of McGonagall's face.

She patted his shoulder. Romulus was used to people patting him everywhere – on his head, cheeks, and shoulder. People seemed to think that he needed patting, like he was a cute, little lap-dog. It didn't help matters that even Madame Lestrangle – he refused to call her Aunt, she was too scary for that – once admitted he had a sweet, angelic, little face. If *she*, Empress of the Undead, thought he was cute, everyone probably thought he was just too adorable for words. Translucent skin contrasting with dark hair, a small figure, and soft eyes – and, of course, the muteness – had too-fearful-for-words effects on one's masculinity.

"Good boy," she said and passed by. The faculty – especially Professors Flitwick and Sprout, not to mention Madam Pomfrey, who practically pounced on him demanding whether he was alright when she saw him – all seemed to think that he needed encouragement at regular intervals. It was truly frightening – and spoke volumes about what Draco's mother called his 'social life' – that he was more popular among men and women who'd long crossed the age of fifty, than with kids his own age.

The brown-haired girl next to Miss Weasley was smiling. She'd just finished her work – while pretty Miss Weasley struggled with hers, a disgruntled look on her face – and was looking around the classroom. Romulus stared at her intently, willing her to return his look. Eventually she noticed his eyes on hers and looked at him. She sized him up in a second – Slytherin, mute, cute. Evidently she thought the latter two counterbalanced the former in his favor, because tentatively, she smiled. It was a nice smile, a genuine smile, the type of smile Draco gave him whenever he'd finished all the Sugar Quills in the pantry (which he did with alarming regularity, Draco was simply mad about those Quills).

Romulus returned her smile.

**000**

It was a blustery late-September day and Padma's skirt whipped around her legs. Not for the first time, she sympathized with Rose Potter's ardent – and often vocalized – desire that the regulation

uniform for girls and boys were the same: if girls had to wear skirts, fine, then so should boys.

"I'm freezing," she whined, as they stepped into the courtyard at break. Belatedly, she realized, *Oh god, I sound like Pansy Parkinson when she's chipped a nail*. But she was in a whiny mood today. Periods and Padma did not work together. Her lower stomach hurt, she had the oddest craving for cabbage, her arms ached even though Ron was chivalrously holding her books for her, and she was firmly convinced that the world was out to get her and her alone.

Ron all but prevented himself from rolling his eyes. She'd complained she was too warm in the Great Hall, that the library smelt of desiccating corpses, that the corridors were too full of canoodling couples, and that the classrooms were full of deadly weapons of assault (which she had to stay away from at all cost, because the world was out to get her)... Michael and Hermione had fled, leaving Ron – who never fled from anything – to follow her like an obedient lap-dog. She felt sorry for him, of course, but she felt even sorrier for herself. The world wasn't out to get him.

"I think I see Parvati," Ron said weakly. "Should I go..."

"I will *bite* off Lavender Brown's ears if I have to listen to her chatter for more than three seconds," Padma said viciously, and Ron instantly let go of the idea of visiting Parvati. "I want Rose," she announced suddenly.

Ron's eyebrows all but marched off his face. *You want to bite off her ears too?*

"I'll say something rude to her, she'll say something even ruder, and I'll feel better at once," Padma explained calmly, as if it was the simplest thing in the world, and Ron was just a great, big dunderhead she had to put up with. Belatedly, she felt sorry for her tone, but he was *male*. He'd just have to put up with her tantrums because she was biologically superior to him. Right.

"Um... I'm not sure that's a good idea..."

“And if she attacks me, I’ll rip out her aorta,” Padma continued on serenely. “And then I’ll eat some cabbage if I have time.”

“Right,” Ron said slowly. “Right.” And he carefully edged away from her. He made a mental note to research Disillusionment Charms with Hermione and Michael, so that all three of them could cast one on Rose.

Padma sat down on a conveniently placed, stone bench that looked crude – and moldy – enough to have been designed by one of the Founders. She crossed her legs together daintily – for some reason or the other, both she and Draco Malfoy always sat with their legs neatly crossed in practically the same way – and smoothed out her skirt, chattering away blithely, as if she’d forgotten that she’d been complaining that it was freezing a scant few seconds ago.

“I think we should get ahead on our History of Magic homework... Just Pre-Seclusion politics gives me headaches, it’s so awfully dull, and can you imagine Baba actually wrote a book on it? Ages ago, of course, he collaborated on the project with Mr. Rodolphus Lestrangle and...”

“Lestrangle?” Ron asked sharply. A second later he feared he’d spoken too sharply because Padma’s dark eyes opened wide and, for the first time that day, it was as though she was actually looking *at* him as her friend, not through him as though he were her humble minion. It would have been a pleasant change, only now she looked scared instead of busy-in-her-own-world. Ron didn’t like people looking scared of him. Before he could even apologize, Padma had grabbed his wrist roughly – so roughly that he winced – and said, “*Don’t* say you’re sorry”

She still looked like she was scared he’d throw her off the bench while she was saying it.

“Um... I won’t?” he asked warily, trying to free his wrist as subtly as possible from her hard grip. *Women.*

“No,” she said firmly, clutching his wrist as hard as ever, like it was a lifeline or something, her ticket to paradise. “No, *I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned that.”

*Mentioned what?* “Um...”

“You’re not mad at me? Are you? Are you?” With each ‘are you’, her nails dug deeper into his tender skin, until all he could do was nod, biting his lips to keep from yelping. Padma must have misunderstood precisely why he was biting his lips, because anxiously she said, “I know you’re mad at me, and it’s all my fault and I’m really, really, awfully sorry, it just sort of slipped out. I mean, we used to know the Lestranges and it’s all so awful and twisted up and I’m so confused, but you’re one of my best friends and really...”

“Would you *please* stop mauling me?” He blurted out the words without thinking them through and was rewarded with the sight of Padma’s huge, dark eyes brimming with tears that threatened to spill over and pour like a deluge that would drown the whole world. Well, perhaps he was exaggerating. He’d never seen Padma cry – but if her twin, Parvati’s frequent stormy bouts of tears were anything to go by (though Padma always insisted that Parvati cried purely for the sake of amusement, not because she was sad or mad or the world was bad)... Well, perhaps it was better not to start a girl crying. He didn’t have much experience with weepy girls – seeing that neither Rose nor Ginny were the sob-a-lot type.

The only bright side was that she let go of his wrist.

“I was...” Padma’s voice was quivering and Ron was wondering whether it’d be better to escape or stay back and comfort her, when help arrived in the form of Rose and Neville. Well, *they* didn’t know that they were going to have to help him shut Padma up, in fact, they didn’t even notice Ron and Padma on the bench. They were walking together briskly, their heads bent close together. Rose was clutching a lumpy brown parcel and her face was contorted into an ugly scowl that signaled the onslaught of a temper tantrum. Neville looked pretty angry too and he was waving his hands around wildly.

Ron didn’t care whether they had better things to do or not. Best friends were supposed to be selfless creatures, forever ready to rush to your aid in times of emergency. A crying girl was an emergency. Never mind that Rose knew less than nothing about crying girls – she’d probably just tell them their lives sucked anyway so what was

the point of crying over minor injustices, with the best intentions in the world – and that Neville wasn't much better. They were best friends. They would have to help.

"Neville! Rose!" he yelled loudly, lurching forwards, grabbing their shoulders, and practically dragging them towards the tearful Padma. "How's life?"

"Wha-?!"" Neville demanded, looking flabbergasted, like he'd been unceremoniously dumped into a different world.

"What the hell?" Rose yelled, slapping Ron hard on the face without noticing who'd dragged her. Belatedly, he remembered she had a phobia of being touched without warning. "Oh...sorry."

"No problem," he muttered, massaging his cheek. Padma, he was thankful to see, hadn't started crying yet. She now looked more startled than miserable.

"Hi Ron," Neville said, catching Rose's wrist. "We'll be going..."

"NOOOOOOOO!" Ron practically screamed, pulling Rose towards him so hard that she almost lost balance and stumbled. "I mean, er, *no*. You can't go. No, I mean, you don't have to. Actually, I mean..."

"Lo Padma," Neville said courteously, "What's the matter?" He knelt down next to Padma.

Rose bent down too and looked curiously at the other girl's face. "Well, look on the bright side," she said cheerfully, "You're worth more than that sucker who dumped you. Was it Michael Corner? I'll smuggle out a Beater's Bat for you and you can attack him with it."

"Um, Rose..."

"Or was it Anthony Goldstein? Blimey, I thought he had a crush on me – well, at least, now we both know that he's a worthless, two-timing goat."

"Actually..."

“Dean Thomas? Seamus Finnigan? Pretty good, I’d say, if you’re into threesomes...”

“It wasn’t anything like...”

“Zacharias Smith, maybe? Double-timing your own sister? Well, if that’s your style...”

“Will, you *please* shut...”

“Blaise? Ah well, Blaise is a prissy ass in any case. Sure, he’s nice to hang around, but if you’re looking for commitment...”

“I am *not* looking for commitment!” Padma cried, looking enraged. “And I have *not* hooked up with every single guy in second year!”

“I should hope not,” Rose said gravely, eyes sparkling maliciously, “Think of all the awful diseases you might catch – unless you’re infected already. If you’re not looking for commitment, of course, there’s always a thing called a one-night stand, and it sure seems like you’re plenty experienced with that...”

It was then Ron understood that she hadn’t been saying all that rubbish under the genuine assumption Padma had been dumped, with the best intentions in the world. Rose was actually *baiting* Padma. Rose? Baiting someone? *Since when’s she become so petty?*

“Rose, I think...” Neville was saying, looking uncomfortable.

Padma though looked eerily calm. “Are you calling me a slut?” she asked coldly.

“Slut?” Rose was grinning. “No, of course not. A slut only sleeps with eleven or twelve guys, at most. Someone of your character... well, ‘seasoned prostitute’ would probably be a better term.” She shifted the lumpy brown parcel in her arms, and was about to say something more, before Padma lunged.

With the speed and agility of a wildcat Padma threw herself on Rose and sent her slamming into the cobblestones, while she clung to Rose’s blouse like a leech. Rose was physically better equipped for a

fight – taller, heavier, more experienced – but she didn't have Padma's fury. Padma pulled herself off Rose before the other girl could gain hold of her bearings and in one quick, fluid motion pulled out her wand. Rose had just pulled herself into a crouching position on the cobblestones, looking a little surprised, a little admiring, and very excited, when Padma, her eyes glittering dangerously, screamed, "*Densaugeo!*"

Rose's nose immediately started growing. With a wild cry, Neville flung himself at Padma and started to wrestle her to the ground, both screaming incoherently all the while. Ron, feeling he was going to throw up, threw himself on Neville, trying to pull him off Padma. They were a confused mass of tangled arms, legs, and screams and Ron lost all sense of his bearings in the violent fight.

People were gathering around and someone was trying to pull Rose's arms, help her up, take her to the Hospital Wing as was the right of an injured combatant... but Rose had lost control. Her *nose*... oooh, Padma was going to suffer. Horrifically. Who said inflicting pain for the sake of vengeance was wrong?

Her eyes narrowed, and she pulled herself up into a crouching position, crawling towards the tangled mass of arms, legs, and screams, licking her lips like a hungry animal. "*Locomoter bench,*" she hissed, pointing her wand towards the heavy, stone bench on which Ron and Padma had been sitting, without thinking her idea through. *Go to hell, bitch.*

The bench began to tremble all over and rose a little. There were screams and she was scared someone had heard her say the spell, would know what she was up to, and put an end to it before anything really happened... But then, before anyone could react, the bench shot up into the air violently and then crashed, with a sickening sound of many broken things, into the ground, right into the centre of the fight. Rose thought she heard the cobblestones crack.

There were screams and Rose's monstrosity of a nose was hanging below her collarbones and she thought she saw blood, staining the grey cobblestones, a long, thick line of blood – yes, *blood*, and there was a tangy stench in the air and she knew, just knew it was Padma's



blood – and many legs whipped past her and she heard the prefects present bellowing to please stay calm...

And all she could do was kneel on the hard cobblestones that dug into her knees and laugh and laugh, because vengeance really *was* sweet.

**000**

The dormitory was dark and blissfully empty when Rose slipped inside. She thanked God, Merlin, Morgana, and Circe that it was empty – she didn't know what she'd have done if it wasn't. Most likely something illegal, a little reminder that their present surroundings were fairly hazardous and that it would be in their best interests to evacuate the room. Immediately. It was actually quite disconcerting to discover, even in her own eyes, she was a menace to society.

She fell onto her bed, burying her face in the thick, white pillows, wishing she could strangle herself in them. *What am I going to do?* She knew that she must look a mess – she'd been crying for at least half-an-hour, in the dungeons when Dumbledore had told her what her punishment would be, then all the way from the dungeons (where she'd lost her way), the Common Room (where she'd slinked around the walls so that no one noticed her, wishing for Daddy's Invisibility Cloak all the way), and then still now...

Her head hurt now, and even half-buried in pillows she felt dizzy, like the world was spinning too fast, like she was going to throw up. And she knew it was a bad sign, a very bad sign when her head started to hurt because of crying. It meant she'd cried too much, over the limits, and that was an evil omen – everyone knew that, there was an old saying about tears and misfortune... The more you cried, the worse things became, and besides crying never helped anyone and she'd always thought anyone who cried was just *weak* and felt proud of herself because she was so strong, but maybe crying wasn't necessarily an indicator of emotional strength or whatever, or maybe she was just weak, even after all her big talk...

She knew she looked hideous, and for the first time she actually cared about that. Because anyone who saw her looking like she did now – red eyes, scrunched-up and wet face, and disheveled hair

sticking to her cheeks – would automatically jump to the conclusion that she'd been crying. And God, she couldn't let them think that. They'd know she was weak, pathetic, and she couldn't let them think that. Appearances were everything if you were a Slytherin.

So, even if she didn't want to, she forced herself to walk to the bathroom and spend the next half-hour scrubbing her face so thoroughly that, eventually, it turned raw and red. Her skin hurt at the end and she felt wobblier than ever, but it helped her get a clearer grasp on reality. Woe is me, and, I am Woe, wouldn't cut it now.

She'd done a stupid thing. She'd been punished. End of story. Not end of world.

She sat on the closed toilet seat, bit her hair like she always did when she was nervous, and reassessed the situation. It wasn't her fault. By God, it wasn't. She wouldn't let herself think that it was. It would confuse things. No, all she had to do was believe that what she'd done had been right – of course, it had, how couldn't it have been, she'd been provoked – and then, she'd be able to hold her head high and her shoulders straight in front of the rest of the school. She needed to be strong for herself, because if she wasn't, who would be strong for her?

She mustn't let anything get to her. Not the fact that Padma was lying in the Hospital Wing with a concussed skull and several cracked bones – *serves that bitch right*. Not the fact that Parvati had screamed and slapped her. Not the dirty looks the Hufflepuffs, Gryffindors, and Ravenclaws shot her. Not the fact that Ron had refused to meet her eyes throughout the day – because the fight had happened only at break and she'd received the teachers' lecture after classes. Not the fact that Neville had finally shut up – as she'd been begging him to do since the diary had arrived at breakfast.

Not the fact that she'd lost seventy-five points for 'attempted murder' – *I wasn't trying to kill her, just teach her a lesson*. Not the fact that Dumbledore would be sending a letter to her parents – she cringed at the thought of what Mum would think, Mum was so judgmental. Not the fact that she had four months' detention, six o'clock every evening, Snape's office. Not the fact that she'd been yelled at by Snape

himself – and she'd never *dreamed* that he'd ever yell at a Slytherin, one of his own house. Not the fact that Flitwick – who she'd once assumed quite incapable of anger – had recommended anger management classes for her – like she was a freak who needed to be shut up at St. Mungo's.

Not the fact that she'd been officially suspended from her Quidditch Team for the rest of the year and that her broomstick had been confiscated.

*I won't think of that*, she thought, slipping out of the bathroom, *I'll think of it later. Tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow.* And in her heart of hearts, she knew that tomorrow would never come – the tomorrow in which she would sit down and bring out everything she'd done and examine it in the clear, harsh light of day.

*September 28, 1992*

*Last October, I saw the Mirror of Erised. It shows you what you desire most in life. Maybe it also shows you what you are, too, and what you will be. People say you are what you eat. Maybe you are what you desire, too. I saw myself grown-up, drop-dead gorgeous, holding the Quidditch World Cup. I also saw myself making out with my godfather, who's twenty years older than me, who's been like a father to me for over twelve years.*

*Do you even know how sick that is? How twisted, how perverted? Me marrying Uncle Padfoot – because it was an after-sex make-out-snog that I saw us doing in the mirror.*

*If that isn't bad enough, I saw myself holding my wand over a bloody corpse. Guess whose corpse that was?*

*Neville Longbottom.*

*Who wants to kill their best friend? Desires it, in fact? That was last year too, when we were even closer than now, when we had a friendship without secrets or rifts or ugly twists.*

*I sicced a bench on Padma Patil today, a bench. She's in the Hospital Wing with a concussed skull and several cracked bones. I broke*

*Neville's collarbone when I was nine by throwing him off a tree. I set a clutch of rabbits on Harry when I was eight and now he's got rabbit-phobia. I risked killing myself, Neville, and Ron when I was seven. When I was four, I told Rick Blair that you'd get strong muscles and bones if you ate a pot of glue and then pretended to do that. He dumped the contents of three pots of glue down his throat in five seconds. He spent two nights at the hospital.*

*Does all that make me capable of murdering someone?*

She waited patiently for an answer. She wanted an answer. She didn't care if the diary was possessed – you couldn't possess a diary. That was just... ridiculous. Neville was being stupid. She kept the diary open and five or six minutes later – she counted – an answer slowly began to appear.

**You say that as if it were an immoral act.**

*It's wrong to kill someone.*

**Is it? Assume a scenario where your dear little brother, your precious best friend, and your beloved godfather – three people whom you'd give your life for, I'm quite sure – were slaughtered. Would you not seek vengeance upon their murderers?**

*I wouldn't kill them.*

**Why not?**

*Like I said: it's wrong.*

**What about in a war?**

*It'd still be wrong. But I'd kill them.*

**You would restrain yourself in the first case, but you would feel no pleasure no matter what punishment the murderers received – if ever caught. In the second case, you admit it would still be wrong, but you would kill them. Why?**

*They'd be on the other side. It would be my duty to kill them.*

**You would have to pick a side?**

*Of course.*

**Running with the hares and hunting with the hounds... it is not your specialty, I presume?**

*What?*

**Choosing the side that wins. Turning turncoat.**

*I couldn't do that.*

**Why ever not?**

*I'd have to let my family and friends go.*

**If you had no family or friends?**

*I have too many of them to be killed off. I'd always be left with obligations to someone.*

**So you would fight for people, and not principles?**

*That sounds all wrong. Principles... I have them. But, I have um, people too and they'd always choose the right principles so why would I need to choose?*

**Fascinating. So you would slaughter innocents if your good godfather ever told you that therein lay your duty?**

*He'd never say that!*

**Still fighting for your people. If you cared about the principles of the matter, you would refuse to do so even if your godfather told you so. Unless of course...**

*Why would I want to kill innocent people?*

**War has a way of jeopardizing your dear ones. It forces you to consider certain options, which you would otherwise never have thought of.**

*You think I'm capable of killing innocent people?*

**More than capable. You seem quite selfish to me. Not to mention, fairly heartless.**

*I hate you. How can I get on in life without being a little selfish? But I'm not heartless. I'm just a bit dim.*

**An easy – albeit unpolished – liar as well. You're quite far from being dim, but you prefer to devote yourself more to extracurricular rather than scholastic achievements.**

*Say bye to that. I've been banned for a whole year from Quidditch.*

**I hope you understand that you deserve that for 'sicking' a bench onto that young lady?**

*No I don't. Well, actually, yes I do. But it was her fault. She provoked me. I just got a little carried away.*

**If you were not twelve years old, and if the lady in question hadn't been attended to – medically, I mean – immediately, you would have been arrested for murder. A little carried away, indeed.**

*It was just a Locomotor spell! Not even dark! I couldn't possibly have killed her – I'm too young!*

**A killing curse needn't necessarily be an Avada Kedavra, my dear child. A well-placed Wingardium Leviosa – shooting a person high into the sky and then just releasing him, so that he falls at the rate of a hundred meters per second – is enough.**

*They teach that to first years!*

**And a five-year-old could kill you by stabbing a sharpened pencil into both your eyes and then through your...**

*Shut up!*

**You get my point?**

*You are sick. Sicker than me.*

**My previous owner was a well-read gentleman. I can't help it if he was also particularly imaginative.**

*Who was he?*

**I'll show you a picture.**

**Well?**

*He's handsome. Just as handsome as I'd imagine Uncle Padfoot, in his sixth year.*

**Who is this mysterious Uncle Padfoot? Aside from being your much-loved godfather?**

*Sirius Black.*

**That explains a good deal. The Blacks – at least of the last few generations – were always noted for their great beauty. My previous owner too was distantly related to them. A half-blood though, so unacknowledged by them.**

*I'm distantly related to the Blacks and I've never been noted for my great beauty.*

**How are you related?**

*My grandmother was Dorea Black.*

**Dorea Black? Interesting. She was in seventh year when my last owner was in second. Slytherin prefect. Have you ever heard the stories about her?**

*Stories? What stories?*

**Perhaps it is better not to divulge such... rumors to one so young. In any case, it is best not to know much of the antecedents of one's honored ancestors.**

*Tell me!*

**I might when you behave your age.**

*Please? Pretty please?*

*If you don't tell me, I'll ask my parents.*

**Liar. They will tell you nothing.**

*You're right. So that means you have to tell me.*

**In exchange for a favor of course?**

*Well... what do you want me to do?*

**Your homework. You'll get even more detentions – I presume, you've received detention for a few months – if you fail to complete your schoolwork. I refuse to repeat any information I might have garnered over the years if your work remains as shoddy as it is.**

*It's not shoddy!*

**Mediocre, then. Surely you don't expect me to say brilliant? You know perfectly well that you are only an average student with a more-than-average talent at Quidditch. It is not genius. It is merely talent. You will work to improve your schoolwork, so that it is at least at par with your skills on the playing field. Yes?**

*I'll try...*

**And I shall help. Now be a good child and put me down. Take up your homework, and if you have any difficulties I shall attempt to explain the concepts. Yes?**

*Fine.*

**Yes?**

*I said fine!*

**Yes?**



*OK, OK – yes! Damn you...*

**Profanity...**

*Arrrrgh...*

**A/N: Rose has been a very bad girl. Nobody can side with her today!**

## ***From Cliff to Fathomless Pit***

*Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.*

### **Carl Jung**

Andromeda is used to waking up early. The sky is streaked palest yellow and soft orange, stars twinkling higher above in the velvety, dark lap of the heavens, when she glides into the living room with a cup of tea. Dora is lying stretched, fast asleep, on the long blue sofa – she's spent the night attending a remedial Stealth and Tracking session for Auror Training. Her long, glossy black curls tumble over her pale, heart-shaped face and for a moment, Andromeda thinks that she looks strikingly like Bellatrix.

There is a tightly-furled *Daily Prophet* at her feet – the news owl must already have delivered – and Andromeda bends down to pick it up. She takes a sip from her cup, wishing that Dora would change her hair, while unfurling the paper. Large headlines scream out at her, and for a moment she is sure that her heart has stopped.

**000**

Druella has been prepared for the news for some time now. Ever since childhood, she has always flattered herself on her composure, her cold sedateness towards whatever the world might throw at her.

At seven, she thought nothing would ever surprise her. Of course, that was before she was better acquainted with Dorea. At twenty-one, she thought nothing would ever hurt her. Of course, that was before – in a single, swift, brutal strike – Mother, Renata, Dorea, and her first child were taken from her. At sixty, she thought nothing would ever make her truly happy again. Of course, that was before she gazed upon her only grandson's angelic face, while he slept blissfully next to her white, drawn but ecstatic daughter.

As she puts down the *Daily Prophet*, fingers trembling, her heart wrenches painfully, as though someone were slowly but surely twisting a knife through it. She wonders whether she will ever see her

daughter again – whether she should now begin to number her amongst the dead, never to be seen.

000

Lucius kisses her forehead as he hands her a delicate tea-cup, shaped like a marble lotus. In his other hand is an unfurled *Daily Prophet*. Narcissa looks away quickly because she knows, knows without being told, what is in the papers.

“I must write to Draco immediately,” she whispers, her voice thicker than usual, tears glimmering in the corners of her eyes. She knows she will live the rest of her life in aching uncertainty – not knowing whether her sister be dead or alive. It will be a hard burden to bear. Perhaps it is deserved, a rough sort of justice – Fate’s vengeance on the heads of the guiltless, for the wrongs of those they are connected to. “He will not understand... his Aunt Bella...”

Lucius squeezes her fingers and his voice is very soft as he murmurs, “Be discreet. Letters might be intercepted.”

She looks up into his grey eyes, usually so cool and remote, and finds only tenderness and solicitation in them, today. She buries her head in his shoulder – his warm, strong shoulder – and sobs freely. Today she cannot, simply *cannot*, be Black or Malfoy or even Narcissa – she is only Cissy.

000

Porcia Ramsey slams her coffee mug violently on the table – half-expecting the glass to shatter under her wrath – and howls, “Fuck!”

Aunt Dolores is at the archway to the living room almost immediately, a disapproving frown on her small face. “Language, darling...” she says, voice high-pitched and girlish as usual. It used to bother Porcia when she was a teenager that her favorite auntie sounded like a five-year-old girl – now she is used to it.

“Profanity is permissible under certain circumstances, Auntie,” she says, breathing hard to keep her anger under control. She flings the

paper across the room. It falls at Aunt Dolores' feet and one glance at the headlines is enough to transform her face.

"Yes, I suppose it is – under certain circumstances," Aunt Dolores murmurs, more to herself than her favorite niece, bending down to pick up the paper and examine it more carefully.

**000**

"Where are you going, darling?" Lily asks groggily, at one in the morning. She is still half-asleep – in bed actually – but the sounds of a certain someone violently moving around the room have woken her up. She peeks one eye open and catches a glimpse of messy black hair. James has always been a morning person, yes, but wearing his work-robcs at one in the morning? Perfectly ridiculous.

"Work," James says curtly.

"*Now?*" Lily half-rises. She is very tired – Snidget and Harry had done the utmost to lower her morale yesterday.

"Urgent," James says laconically. "*Where* are my socks?"

"Bottom drawer, left side," Lily murmurs. "You want the black ones, right? What's so urgent?"

"Mmm..." James mutters, shuffling in said drawer.

"Well?"

James sits down on the floor, pulling on his socks. He looks so like a little boy that Lily has to smile, but she makes her voice firm – or tries to – as she asks, "*Well?* What's the matter?"

He finally looks around at her, pulling his right sock on. He is left-handed and does his right sock at the end. His face is very serious, his jaw set hard (and for a moment he looks ridiculously like Rose when she's in a temper), as he says, "Bellatrix Lestranger."

**000**

“Is dead?” Rose repeated again.

“That’s what it says here,” Pansy said, putting down the *Daily Prophet*. There is a startled, disbelieving look on her pug-like face. “Cause of death, apparently poisoning. She was well when she was served her dinner at eight o’clock, 27th of September, but the elf and Auror who were sent to her in the morning found her lying on her bed. She was in the same position at lunch and dinner so, of course, they had to investigate and...”

Someone upsets pumpkin juice on the table and a small, white-faced blond boy stands up violently and rushes from the Great Hall. Whispers spread through the five long tables like little wildfires, muted exclamations of shock, disbelief, bemusement, and excitement. She is already linked to the Weasley-Smith-Bones case, which is already the under-talk of the whole school. The primary suspect – dead?

“Inside involvement is suspected,” Pansy read out again. Being the only Slytherin second-year to subscribe to the *Daily Prophet*, she had now attained a certain pre-eminence as the only dispenser of news available.

“Better a private death than a public execution,” Theodore Nott said wisely. “The Malfoys and Lestranges will seal up the matter as soon as possible, of course.” He looked significantly down the table at Romulus LeStrange, who was reading Geoffrey Amberquaffle’s paper.

“Seal up the matter?” Rose snorted scornfully, peering at the paper again. She sensed Neville’s presence over her shoulder and knew that he was just as shell-shocked as her, as anyone in fact. “With a leech like Rita Skeeter hot on the case? Hell, no.”

Blaise’s eyes sparkled maliciously as he wound an arm around Rose’s waist. “Splendid – we have enough gossip material to last us another month. I wonder where Draco is.”

“Somewhere where you won’t find him,” Neville muttered, low enough so that only Rose could hear him. Rose half-glanced up at him and saw him turn towards Blaise, a scowl on his face. His voice was quite cold and stiff as he said, “Zabini, I forbid you to go around messing with his mind. The same goes for you, Pansy – when he wants your

condolences, he'll damn well ask you for them. There is no need to dog his footsteps with a handkerchief."

Pansy pretended she hadn't been rummaging in her skirt pocket for a handkerchief. But Blaise chuckled, looking like he was going to enjoy himself. He pulled Rose closer to him and squeezed her waist even harder. Rose was just about to squirm out of his grasp and playfully slap his cheek when he said, his voice as sweet and poisonous as Neville's had been cold and stiff, "You forbid me, Longbottom? *Forbid?*" His eyes glittered and his arm around Rose's waist was so hard that she was sure that he was going to give her a few pretty bruises to wear on her abdomen. She stayed still, hoping that he'd loosen his grip on her, and pretended that she didn't like the way he was holding her.

"Take your filthy paws off her, you fetid piece of excreta," Neville said very quietly. All the Slytherin second-years were nearby – they'd all clustered around Pansy and her paper – and they were now all gaping. Rose began to feel a little uncomfortable at the nine pair of eyes so avidly feasting on her.

"What, and drop her into your arms?" Blaise asked softly. "So you can play the chivalrous knight in shining armor – snatching her from the claws of the wicked dragon? That shows just how much you know about her – she'll play the acquiescent damsel-in-distress for you, will she? And you'll ride off into the sunset with all the glory, your sword flashing?"

Rose blinked. Once. Twice. *Damsel-in-distress? Good lord, he's read too many Tales of Beetle the Bard.*

"I never implied that –" Neville's fists were clenching and unclenching. His left eye was twitching just like it did when he was furious. Theodore Nott's eyes were narrowed calculatingly. Daphne Greengrass looked simply confused that the phrase 'damsel-in-distress' was being used in context with Rose.

"You fucking liar," Blaise hissed. "We're not idiots, Nev." He began to mimic Neville's voice with frightening accuracy, capturing all the self-assured pomposity and lovable arrogance that made Neville's voice so Neville-y, "*Rose always listens to me. She'll do it if I ask her to, of*

*course, she will. Yeah, sure, she's so immature – but I'm working on that, she'll pay attention to what I say."*

"You –" Neville looked as if he were barely restraining himself from launching straight at Blaise. Crabbe and Goyle's mouths were hanging so wide open that their chins touched their collarbones – well almost.

"Why don't you flat-out say that she's your bloody property?" There was a caress in his voice as he said, in Neville's voice again, "*Wildcat – she's a total lioness.*" They'd been standing so close, for so long, that they'd started attracting attention from the other tables too. Rose's eyes wandered to the Gryffindor Table and she saw Zacharias Smith, sitting alone at the end of the table, gaping at her being held by Blaise. She caught his eyes and his eyebrows stretched high, almost into his hairline.

"And you're forbidding me from talking to Draco?" Blaise asked again. "If you treat your best friend like your personal pet, your second best friend like a doormat – what about your so-called third best, eh?" He finally released hold of Rose and stepped a little back from her. She rubbed her waist, not sure of what to do, still slowly digesting the facts. She didn't look at anyone at the Slytherin Table; she didn't want to meet their eyes. There was some comfort in staring across the room at a boy who would willingly have thrown her into the Lake, given a chance. There was none in staring at the boy right in front of her.

"Blaise Zabini, you are a bloody wanker," Neville said quietly. And then, he simply launched himself at Blaise.

**000**

Rose flopped down wearily at her seat in Charms. There was some small comfort that today she was not the centre of attention – as she had feared she would be yesterday. The incident with the bench had been almost entirely eclipsed by that of the Longbottom-Zabini fight at breakfast and by Bellatrix Lestrange's sudden death. Luckily, they shared Charms with the Gryffindors, not the Ravenclaws. Gryffindors were not Hufflepuffs, but at least they were not Ravenclaws.

To her surprise, Theodore Nott took a seat next to her. Usually he sat – or slept – at the back of the classroom, just like usually she sat next to Blaise or Neville. Of course, today Blaise and Neville were in the dungeons with Snape, but that was beside the point. Theodore was a social recluse and she was... well, she wasn't. Why the sudden change of seating arrangements?

Parvati Patil threw her a very nasty look across the room – Padma was still recovering in the Hospital Wing. Lavender Brown sat down next to her and threw Rose an equally nasty look. *Slutty bimbos*, she thought, pretending that the looks didn't hurt her a little.

"Hi," she said politely to Theodore, taking out *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Two* and putting her wand on the table.

"Hello," he said, with equal politeness. Professor Flitwick bounced into the room, looking his usual chirpy self. Rose could hardly believe that less than twenty-four hours ago, he'd been berating her so soundly that she'd almost cried.

"Good morning to you all! Now, today we shall begin Drought Charms – you've all done plenty of work on the theory, so I expect all of you to perform the spell correctly by the end of the class? Yes? Very good then! Miss Patil, Miss Greengrass if you would so kindly distribute these bowls..."

"I want to talk to you," Theodore said quietly to Rose.

"You already are," Rose reminded him absently, grabbing the bowl of water that Daphne levitated towards her. She brushed her hair away from her face and bent over her bowl, trying to calm her mind. You couldn't perform a charm well if your mind was as chaotic as a bloodthirsty mob.

"You know what I mean," Theodore said, wrinkling his forehead in concentration as he peered at his bowl.

"Of course I do," Rose said, and took a deep breath. "Um - *siccus*!" Ripples appeared on the surface of the water, but nothing else happened. She sighed and opened her book, massaging her head with one hand. It wasn't even October and she was already embroiled



into so many horrible messes. Real storms were beautiful, but metaphysical storms weren't very pleasant when you were caught in the crossfire. Or something like that.

She studied the diagrams on the page once again and then hastily shut it. Flitwick didn't like students opening their books to check the diagrams and pronunciations every two seconds – he said it was no use for them to blindly replicate the textbook solutions; it had to come from *within*. He was just weird. In fact, most of the teachers were – from Snape who wore electric blue pajamas with orange polka dots and a candy-pink dressing robe, to Minerva McDracula, to Dumbledore who had one too many screws loose, to Flitwick who was always impossibly jovial...

"*Siccus!*" Theodore said and nothing happened. Similar calls resounded through the classroom – with similar results. Even Hermione Granger was struggling with her bowl.

"Ah well," Theodore said, shrugging. He turned towards Rose, looking very serious. "The boys' dormitory isn't going to be a very peaceful place for the next few weeks."

"No, I don't think it will be," Rose said, hardly listening to him. She was frowning and wondering whether she should twist her wrist more towards the left or the right.

"Blaise won't let it drop. He finds drama the same way a Niffler does gold – and he clings onto it, even harder than a Niffler," Theodore said quietly, waving his wand half-heartedly over his bowl, so that Flitwick wouldn't suspect he was talking instead of working. The class was certainly loud enough to shield his off-topic whispers and mask them as on-topic spells. "And Neville's too damned proud to ignore him. Draco'll just sit around, sulking about his Aunt Bella, and Crabbe and Goyle will enjoy the fight."

"Really? Sounds depressing."

"Thanks for the sympathy," Theodore said, looking annoyed she wasn't paying more attention to him. "It'll lead to more fights, more points off Slytherin. Before we know it, there'll be a full-fledged, five-

year-long vendetta on our hands. Somehow school enemies always manage to hate each other for the rest of their lives.”

“Yeah,” Rose said quietly, “sometimes they kill each other.”

“You mean Bellatrix Lestrangle and Saoirse Donoghue?” Theodore asked. “Oh well... yes, I suppose so. Well, it’s pretty bad for everyone concerned, don’t you think so?”

Rose looked at him and smiled sweetly. Unconsciously, her lashes started fluttering and her voice became softer, more mellow as she said, “Let me see... you want me to do something for you?”

“For everyone concerned,” Theodore said quietly, his eyes as hard as flint. “For the greater good.”

“Ah yes, excellent, Miss Granger! Now look all of you – Miss Granger has done it... yes, yes, of course, five points to Gryffindor, and would you mind helping Miss Brown, yes...”

Rose cast a cursory glance at the smugly smiling Hermione Granger and turned back to Theodore. “You think I have any influence over Blaise and Neville? Even after what was said today?”

“Are you going to cooperate?” Theodore asked.

“How Slytherin of you to ask me – don’t you trust me?”

“What’s your price?”

“Information,” Rose said quietly, setting down her wand, eyes flashing. “Accurate, unbiased information – if you can supply it to me, I’ll see what I can do for you. Is that alright with you?”

Theodore nodded briefly, before plunging straight into the murky depths of what went on in the boys’ dormitory. “Neville said those things about you, yes – I’ve heard them with my own ears, right in the same tone and the same voice. Yes, even that wildcat line – Blaise is a great mimic. And, no, I don’t think he has a crush on you.”

“He probably doesn’t,” Rose agreed. “But what if...”

"I know what you're thinking, and I don't think you're right. You've known him for a long time," Theodore said impatiently. "He's not that good of an actor that he could mask such a..."

"He's a better actor than you," Rose said crossly. "And I'm not very good at judging whether people are acting or not, if you haven't noticed."

"Never mind about that – that's your business," Theodore said, waving his hand. "Blaise was trying to provoke him, today – and maybe you too. He was just mashing up everything to get a reaction out of Neville – sure Neville has a bit of a superiority complex, and maybe he did imply some of that tripe about you listening to him all the time... but at least a superiority complex is better than a psychopathic urge to kill and destroy isn't it?" He grinned sardonically at her, but before she could open her mouth in protest, he said, "I'm not blaming you, not at all. I think you're a charming, original girl and whatever you do is none of my business. Merlin knows, I have too many insane ancestors to sit in judgment on you."

"But why was Blaise trying to provoke us?"

Theodore chuckled dryly, looking amused at her ignorance. "Because that's what he *does* – he gets a kick out of it, just like you do throwing benches on people and Pansy bitching about everyone and Draco strutting around like one of the albino peacocks on his estate. There's no reason to it – he's a Niffler for stirring up trouble, like I said."

"I thought he was my friend," Rose said quietly, picking up her wand. She'd already forgotten what spell she was supposed to use on her bowl of water. "He never says things like that to me."

"Because he likes you better than Neville, obviously," Theodore said. "Though that's not saying much – I bet he thinks you're too naïve to mess around with. You are very naïve, you know."

"Much obliged," Rose said coolly. "I'm naïve, yet random Gryffindors have come up accusing me of sleeping with every single member of the Slytherin Quidditch team." She frowned, chewing a piece of her hair like she did when she was nervous. "But why pick today of all days to cook up such a mess?"

“Zabini feeds on the drama of the moment,” Theodore said. “I bet he couldn’t resist with all the hubbub over Bellatrix LeStrange, and then Neville *did* incite him. Blaise and he don’t get along.”

“I seem to have a breathtaking talent for alienating my friends,” Rose murmured, more to herself than Theodore. Then she looked at him and said, “What do you want me to do about Blaise and Neville?”

“Make them shut their traps about the whole matter. Make them forget everything, keep them away from each other’s throats – that sort of thing, of course.”

“*How?*”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Theodore said, looking annoyed. “Using your feminine wiles perhaps? Threatening to throw benches on their heads? I’m sure that’ll have *some* effect on them.”

“Neville might listen to me,” Rose sighed. “Blaise won’t – he’s a fucking free agent, he is.”

“Then don’t try to influence him,” Theodore said. “Your purpose will be served if you make sure Neville keeps his cool, won’t it? Blaise will just get tired of provoking him after a while. God, we’d better get a head on these bowls... half the class is finished.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Rose muttered, looking at her bowl. She felt angry, frustrated, tired, and depressed. She felt like falling into a deep, deep sleep and never emerging from it, never having to face reality again. She could practically feel bruises arising on her waist – physical bruises that mirrored the ones in her mind. *I’m falling off a cliff, into a fathomless pit.* She felt too weak to be furious, really furious. For the first time in years, she felt well and truly helpless. Weak.

She raised her wand and said, her clear voice ringing, “*Siccus!*”

The bowl quavered for half-a-second, and then shattered into infinitesimal, small fragments, shards of glass raining down on Rose’s hands.

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*I'm writing with my left hand, that's why my letters are all so quivery. Pomfrey refused to heal up my right hand – she just bound it up and gave a lame excuse about my body rejecting magical antidotes, because I've been through so many of them and that I should curtail my usage of them. Old cow – she loves to see people suffer.*

**You poor child.**

*Are you laughing at me?*

**Why yes, in fact I am. It's certainly no less than what you deserve – can't you see the irony of being healed three feet in front of the girl whom you so severely attacked a mere few hours ago?**

*More than twenty-four hours, actually. And she's fine now – she'll be discharged day after tomorrow.*

**You say your bowl shattered? But you were only performing a Drought charm. Did you use the correct incantation?**

*I said Siccus.*

**Quite fascinating... you must have been thinking about something else. Words aren't everything you now – the incantations are merely empty vessels, which serve as a focusing point towards which you can direct your magical power. Naturally, if you were experiencing some particularly strong emotions at the moment – not in the least related to a Drought charm – the incantation would have served no purpose. The spell would have taken the course your energy and sentiments at the point directed it towards.**

*You mean there's no use in memorizing the spells in school?!*

**Not in the slightest. However those are standard spells, and young children – and many adults, as well – require a focusing point. Even with the proper incantation, few – at least at the preliminary level – can manage a new spell at the first attempt.**

**Without the incantation to focus your energies... well, it would be nigh impossible. Quite dangerous in fact, for the more talented.**

*Interesting theory.*

**It is pure fact.**

*I think I've just about killed Goldstein's crush on me. He probably thinks I'm a psychopath at this point – poor guy. Ron is avoiding me and I'm avoiding Neville. Lovely relationship, no?*

**Give him some time – he'll come around to your point in a few days.**

*Yeah right.*

**Sarcasm ill suits you.**

*And smugness sits terribly badly on you. I'm going to have to talk to Neville about Blaise tomorrow – God, I wish I could skip it, but I did promise Theodore. I mean, it was a cold, hard bargain really. It's such a hassle. I wish I was in Gryffindor – all the Gryffs seem so, well, uncomplicated. No backbiting, no bargaining, no butchering with sarcasm...*

**I'm sure Gryffindors have their own problems too. Surely Godric Gryffindor is a notorious example of one such, er, *complicated* Gryffindor?**

*What did he do?*

**He was in love with a Muggle girl and when she refused to marry him, in favor of a more handsome suitor, he burnt up her whole village and starved both the maiden and her favored one to death, ten feet in front of each other.**

*Really?!*

**It could be fiction, but it is certainly a very popular tale.**

*Never heard it.*

Who would bother to tell a child such stories? Would you ever read out a tale like that as a bedtime story to your children?

*Oh god... no. Not that I want kids. I mean, they're cute and everything but...*

**Irksome?**

*Exactly. Uncle Moony said that I needed to control my anger yesterday. He looked very sad and awfully disappointed in me. I wonder what Uncle Padfoot thinks.*

**You hold his opinion in high estimation...**

*You know I do. Stop asking redundant questions.*

**I beg your pardon, Your Excellency. Have you finished your homework?**

*In History class. I had nothing else to do and I wasn't sleepy, so of course, I decided to do my homework. I'm turning into a Ravenclaw.*

**Hardly. I cannot discern a particularly intellectual light in your previous statements. Or even a logical, coherent light.**

*I'll pretend I'm as naïve as everyone makes me out to be and didn't catch that insult. Give me some advice.*

**About what?**

*Anything – life, food, how to escape angry Quidditch captains who've threatened to chop off your head...*

**Are you very tired tonight?**

*Mentally, yes. And my waist hurts too. But not really tired, I never get tired easily. I'm as fit as a horse.*

**Hopefully you don't look like one. Never mind, I want to try an experiment – are you up for it?**

*Is it dangerous?*

**Not in the slightest.**

*How dull.*

**You are ambidextrous?**

*Pretty much. Why?*

**Can you perform a spell using your wand left-handed? Aside from a simple *Lumos***

*I don't...*

**Have you been taught to use the spell to make an object flash different colors, non-stop? Don't they still teach that to first-years?**

*The Couleurs aléatoires charm?*

**Yes. Try to perform it left-handed.**

*Piece of cake.*

*Well, I did it.*

**I assume it was more like a piece of rock candy than cake? You certainly took your time – ten minutes have elapsed.**

*And you have a built-in timer or what? Yeah it took me some time because I was out of PRACTICE.*

**That merely highlights your inadequacy at performing even basic charms. Though I must say, I'm quite pleased to see that you didn't give up; you've certainly displayed a creditable amount of persistence. You are not used to performing spells left-handed, just as most of your classmates are unused to writing left-handed. Therefore, the spells you perform are most certainly below the mark of those you perform right-handed. You understand?**



*Duh.*

**With practice, determination and concentration I'm sure you can overcome this defect. You have already learnt of the advantages of ambidexterity – imagine how you would benefit on becoming completely ambidextrous. The option is up to you whether to pursue this course – and reap the benefits.**

*Sounds interesting. Will you help me?*

**I shall do everything in my power.**

*That'd be fun! Tell me, if I had two wands could I perform different spells simultaneously?*

**It is quite possible. Rowena Ravenclaw was an ambidextrous witch, and I believe you have heard the popular epithet bestowed on her –*Madame des deux baguettes magiques*.**

*What?*

**You are sadly behind in your reading material. It means the Lady of the Two Wands. As to your earlier question – yes, it is possible. There are notable historical examples – Antioch Peverell, Erzsébet Báthory, Numitor Black... Bear in mind however, that the potential for things to spiral quite bewilderingly out of control in such experiments is enormously high. It is not an easy goal, even for a fully qualified witch or wizard – certainly not for an untrained, inexperienced child of twelve with such an undisciplined, illogical mind.**

*You honestly think you can put me off? The higher the stakes, the better.*

**Now what did I say about an illogical mind? My dear girl, I'm quite sure that you will stop at nothing to reach your goal – quite laudable of you – but you won't get far with that sort of attitude, based solely on trivial, momentary emotions. You must *think*. I'm sure that's quite hard for you, but yes, it is quite necessary while undertaking such endeavors. When you can perform spells left-handed as well as you can right-handed – and you**

**must perform both better than anyone in your peer group – then you might seriously begin to consider such an aim. Most likely you will lose interest in such a pursuit by then.**

*I won't!*

**I admire determination. I hold mule-headed, unreasonable stubbornness in the lowest contempt.**

*I mean... well, I don't know. I'll practice spells left-handed. I'll try to be as good as Ron and Hermione Granger. I'll work harder – I have more time, now that I don't have any more Quidditch sessions.*

**A quick learner, I see! Well, I applaud your spirit. Let us see what comes of it.**

**A/N: I've posted character pictures on my profile – tell me what you think! Everyone who's interested in the Dorea-Druella relationship, please check out my story *Jonquils, Irises and Pink Carnations*. Btw, is this chapter as good as my last one?**

**Alexandra: A slightly minor effect from the diary, but a lot of it is just herself. She can't control her anger, very well, and the angrier she is the more irrational she becomes.**

**Kike: Personality disorder? Oh boy, yeah – just look at her Black ancestors, they're enough to give a couple of generations personality disorders! She's a psychopath, behind a mask of sanity. Not in a I'm-Going-to-kill-everyone-around-me sense, but on a social level she is like that.**

*...the ability to conceal from other people that your psychological makeup is radically different from theirs. Since everyone simply assumes that conscience is universal among human beings, hiding the fact that you are conscience-free is nearly effortless.*

*You are not held back from any of your desires by guilt or shame, and you are never confronted by others for your cold-bloodedness. The ice water in your veins is so bizarre, so completely outside of their personal experience, that they seldom even guess at your condition.*

*In other words, you are completely free of internal restraints, and your unhampered liberty to do just as you please, with no pangs of conscience, is conveniently invisible to the world.*

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**psychopath .**

**htm) (Tell me if the link doesn't work)**

## ***Conflict of View***

*I believed it would justify the means  
It had a hold over me*

Blinded to see the cruelty of the beast  
It is the darker side of me  
The veil of my dreams deceived all I have seen

## **The Truth Beneath the Rose**

“Did I ever mention that you look gorgeous in cashmere?”

Rose looked up warily into Blaise’s brightly smiling face. Though she felt strongly tempted to tell him to fuck off, she knew that would be bad policy. Undiplomatic. A superfluous, redundant gesture that would have no impact whatsoever on his actions. Of course, she could always *shove* him off the bleachers – and have the satisfaction of watching him fall fifty feet and break his stupid, scrawny neck – but she had good reason to believe the administration would not look kindly on her excuse that he was a jackass who deserved to be annihilated. The administration was just biased.

Instead, she only said, forced courtesy in her voice, “You’ve never told me I look gorgeous in anything at all.”

“That’s because you don’t,” he said easily, taking a seat – uninvited – next to her on the bleachers. He must have noticed her stiffen, for his smile turned even brighter as he said, “You look hideous most of the time – always wandering around in those terrible denims or cargoes – and don’t even get me started on your fetish for army prints, Rose. Soft fabrics and soft colors are you – you might want to consider a combination of pink and charcoal. That’d look lovely with your complexion.”

“Then you’ll just have to get used to the fact that I’ll never look lovely,” Rose said coolly, focusing on the game again. The Gryffindors were practicing and Rose had to admit they might just be better than the Slytherins – now that she was off the team, of course, – by a narrow margin. Maybe it was because of the fact that Wood was a brutal slave-driver (brilliant Keeper though, man, the guy had the Scindinski

Switch down perfectly), maybe because with Draco as the Slytherin Seeker the team were hard put to keep up their original standard... whatever the reason, Rose was now seriously worried Slytherin might just lose the match against Gryffindor in mid-November. Of course, that was over a month later, but still... you never could tell.

"Oh, right. You have this weird, unreasonable phobia of the color pink, don't you?" Blaise grinned. "I think Pansy said that... not masculine enough for you, is it?"

"No," Rose said, absently, watching Wood block Bell's attempted goal narrowly. He had a nice smile, she decided. Not saccharinely sweet like a Hufflepuff, not smug like a Ravenclaw, or challenging like a Slytherin... just nice. "No, I hate pink."

"Is it the color you hate, or its connotations?" Blaise asked softly, watching her eyes follow Wood. "Pink – associated in the modern age with femininity. Girly-ness. That's why you hate it, don't you?"

Rose ignored him. One of their Beaters was Cormac McLaggen, a burly third year. He had a way of swinging his bat, that though an aesthetical tragedy (he looked like a baboon brandishing a club) was particularly effective. Not too much application of force, just the bare minimum, good strategy too, since it worked well and didn't involved too much expenditure of energy... she'd have to mention that tactic to Flint.

"I think you do. If blue was the 'it' color for little girls, and not pink, you'd hate it with a passion. But what do you have against grey?"

Rose kept quiet, hardly listening to him. Absently, she picked at the hem of her apple green, cashmere sweater. It was early October and, logically, it should be too cold for cashmere already, but she'd reinforced the fabric with a Warming Spell. Logically, though, she shouldn't have even gone to the trouble of taking half-an-hour out of her day to search for a spring sweater and then enchant it for use as an autumn sweater. She should just have grabbed one of her ugly, old coats. But she'd remembered, midway through her homework, Aunt Mary told her last year that she looked stunning in that sweater and, well... she'd let that influence her decision.

*God, I'm turning into such a girl.*

"Mmm? Arsenic, charcoal, slate – they're beautiful shades, really they are. I think you should try them out."

*Gryffindors really do have the nicest smiles*, she thought, picturing Uncle Padfoot and Daddy. *Do I even smile nowadays? Or do I just smirk? Have I turned into just another Slytherin, just another sly, smirking face in the crowd?* The thought depressed her for a moment, and her face hardened.

A tinge – just that, nothing more than a tinge – of impatience colored Blaise's voice now, "Ideal conditions for Quidditch today. Makes you want to jump on a broom and... oh, I'm sorry. You're banned from flying for two months and from joining the Quidditch team until next year, right? How stupid of me to forget."

Rose shrugged, running her fingers through the soft, apple green fabric of her sweater. "It has its compensations."

"Really? Personally, I can't find the silver lining here."

Rose turned to him, a sweet smile spreading over her face. "I have enough free time to stalk Zachy-poo now."

If Blaise had been Neville or Ron or Draco he would probably have fallen off his seat. As he was only Blaise Zabini, his mouth fell open for a split second before he remembered it was uncouth to leave it hanging, and shut it. His face tightened, but his tone was as calm as ever as he said, "Maybe you ought to ask for autographs."

*This is just stupid*, Rose thought, aggravated. *I'll never come up with a line that'll shut him up, why bother? He'll always have a comeback.* Moodily, she stared at the players on the pitch, not seeing anything. The air was getting chillier and she shivered, knowing that the Warming Spell on the sweater was weakening. She didn't have much time left before she had to go back into the castle.

Silence stretched between them, for several long minutes. Lances of ruby, russet, and gold shot through the flaming sky as the sun began its slow descent below the horizon. Rose heard the Gryffindor team

shouting and laughing as they shot through the sky, the only sounds in the vast, deserted stadium.

“Heard any rumors about the changes they have planned for Hogwarts?” Blaise’s voice was light, conversational.

“Yes.” What was the point of denying it? Everyone had heard the rumors.

“They’re still on the drawing board but I’ve heard the Ministry’s quite keen on enforcing the changes, while the Board of Governors is opposed to it. They want to include Muggle Studies as a compulsory subject, while Astronomy gets demoted to being an elective.”

“Mr. Malfoy won’t like that,” Rose said quietly, remembering what Daddy had once told her about Draco’s father’s influence with the Board of Hogwarts Governors. *Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

“He won’t like many of the changes they’re working on then – someone wanted to include *Mathematics* of all things, compulsory till seventh year, as well, at one point in time. Nothing’s been finalized yet, but...” Blaise shuddered dramatically.

“I like Maths,” Rose said. “It makes me feel grateful that my I.Q. is at least over three digits long – most people are just stuck with one-digit numbers.”

A look of incomprehension settled over Blaise’s face and Rose smiled smugly. The concept of I.Q., just like that of computers and movies and the subway, was an inherently Muggle one. She’d watched Disney movies at home, worked on computers in her Muggle elementary school, and been on the subway to a London mall many times in her life – but only because her mother was Muggle-born. Blaise was a Pureblood – there was no way he could know anything about those.

Blaise managed to straighten his expression, to one less bemused, as he said, “they’re hiring a therapist from St. Mungo’s to work here, full-time. Help the students deal with stress, emotional tangles, and

all that stuff. Psychological problems too, I think, Mother told me. You might want to visit him when he arrives here.”

“Better to be a psychopath than a whore who’d spread her legs to her own son if he paid her enough,” Rose said, still smiling, “What’s that catchy limerick they have scrawled about your mother in the guys’ toilet? Oh, yeah...”

She got no further, because, without warning, Blaise’s hand shot out and slapped her face so violently that her head swung, with a crack, to the side. She gasped, eyes blurred, and her neck aching. Her cheek felt like someone had struck it with a Beater’s bat. Eyes closed, she gingerly brought her fingers to her hot cheek. She’d been hit many times, but never so violently on the face, never so unprepared for an attack... Blaise Zabini. Who would have thought he’d ever physically hurt anyone?

“The next time you say something like that about my mother, I will kill you.”

Eyes still shut, she heard someone getting up and striding away. When she opened her eyes again – dusk had descended and the sky was a distorted mélange of indigos and inky-blues.

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Nymphadora Tonks leaned against the rough wall of the Aurors’ training court, wiping her sweaty face with a fresh towel that Ilane Brownhatchet threw at her. The Aurors really *did* have a training court, a massive chamber located on the very lowest level of the Ministry, where the pros practiced dueling and the amateurs honed their flirting skills. All the adrenaline flowing sure aroused you.

Today she’d done her hair in a layered bob, her blond hair highlighted bronze and copper. She’d done her eyes just like Mrs Potter’s, and everyone who’d met her had complimented her on the way she looked. Even Neil Dey, the notoriously reclusive – albeit *goooooooooooooorgeous* – rookie. As she glanced across the huge room at him, sitting on a bench alone, their eyes met. He sort of smiled and eighteen-year-old Dora Tonks felt color flood her cheeks.



*Oh dear lord, I want to snog you, grope you, shag you!!*

“Ogling Neil Dey are we?” a voice asked wryly.

“Mmm-hmm,” Dora said fervently, “Oh my *God*, just look at those abs and that hair, I so want to run my hands through it, and then I’ll go down and slowly, down his shirt and oh God!” She squealed excitedly, rubbing her hands together.

“You look demonic,” the voice informed her gravely. “More like you want to eat him alive then...”

“I want to *devour* him!”

“Oh. Okay – terrible imagery overload.”

“I would turn cannibal for him! I’d drink a vat of er- boiling chocolate for him! Dark, bitter chocolate – not the Honeydukes’ kind – too!”

“I suppose no sacrifice is too great for love?”

Dora nodded fervently, smiling brightly at nineteen-year-old Cheryl Holloway. Cheryl, a former Hufflepuff just like Dora and a year above her, had been Head Girl at Hogwarts two years ago. A lot of people called her haughty and stuck-up, but Dora liked her. She liked most people actually – she could get along with practically any kind of person, just like her father.

“He is cute,” Cheryl conceded. “But you guys would never get along... I mean you’re really social and gregarious, while he’s just... well, you know what I mean.”

“That just adds to his mysterious allure! His aura!”

“There’s no way you’ll get over your crush, is there?” Cheryl asked, amused. “You’re always so full of energy – even just two minutes after dueling with James Potter. You weren’t putting in your best though in the match, I mean he was just using the most basic spells, and it was over, in what, a minute?”

“Seventy-five seconds – Brownhatchet clocked me. He let me off easy because I looked a bit winded,” Dora said. “And I am winded too... but my love for Neil gives me the strength to carry on, though all is almost lost!” And she beamed brightly.

Cheryl chuckled, patting her shoulder. “Let’s talk about something serious,” she said, “I’ve been sitting behind Ryenne and Scarlett and... well, you know how they run on about guys and Amberquaffle and Snitch and make-up. Baffles me how those two bimbos ever got into Auror training.”

“Scarlett’s really smart when she wants to be,” Dora said. “And Ryenne’s a genius... she just giggles too much and she’s crazy about boys. Well, not that I’m not too. Hey, I’m eighteen – what else do you expect?”

“Ugh, I’m not going to stand for all that crap from you too,” Cheryl groaned. “I want to talk about something morbid. I’ve been reading that book – what’s it called? – oh yeah, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, he is a wizard even though it’s under Muggle publications and everything. Seriously, it makes me feel like crying it’s so depressing.”

“Lots of people die in it?”

“No, not really,” Cheryl said slowly. “Just the tone – it’s so melancholy and looking-into-the-past-ish. Anyway, I want to talk about something sad.”

“Bellatrix Lestrange?” Dora asked calmly, her voice the same as ever, her face not betraying the fact that the woman in question was her aunt and probably the only woman in the world whom her mother feared. Feared, hated, resented, loved.

“Dead as a doorknob,” Cheryl said, her face distorting into a savage snarl. “Tonks, I *knew* Bill Weasley – he was dating Livia, that’s Ryenne’s older sister, that year too – and believe me, when I think about what happened to him, I’m only sorry that she was boiled slowly in a cauldron of melting oil and that her carcass wasn’t thrown to the dogs.”

"I knew Charlie Weasley," Dora said quietly. "He was in my year too and the last time I saw him was on the Hogwarts' Express at the end of second year. Being boiled alive is too gentle for that animal."

They looked at each other for a moment, and then Cheryl said, very quietly, "I *still* can't believe that I'm going to be an Auror. That I'll have to deal with these kind of people on a well, almost daily basis, and *not* murder them in the most gruesome ways I can think of. I know it's wrong, that I shouldn't even think about it, but how do you manage to restrain yourself from Crucioing these kind of people? It's not even a personal case here – I mean, I didn't even like Bill that much and I despised Livia, poor thing, – and still... well you know how I feel. What if it was more personal? Wouldn't you have wanted revenge against them if they killed someone close to you?"

"That's what separates us from them," Dora sighed, biting her lips and frowning.

Cheryl gave her a look.

"Yeah, I would have wanted revenge," Dora sighed. "I can see now, why so many Aurors seem like they need permanent wards in St. Mungo's. Just think about what they've seen! I mean, if I saw even ten-percent of what Mad-Eye Moody saw I'd go completely crazy, not just paranoid. And not being able to do anything – or well, just a little bit – about it too!" She shivered.

"Well, look on the bright side," Cheryl said, patting Dora's shoulder awkwardly, "At least we weren't Aurors during the war. That's something."

"Yeah, yeah it is," Dora said, staring across the room, at James Potter who was dueling Ilane Brownhatchet.

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"Rose, I want to talk to you."

"Talk then."

“Don’t you dare give me the cold shoulder, Rose Iris Potter! You know what I’m trying to say, so stop being so...”

“Obdurate?”

“*What?* Was that an insult?”

“To someone who deserves to be insulted her terminal imbecility, it was.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, put down that diary and let’s actually *talk!*”

Rose sighed and put down the diary, a twisted smile appearing on her face. “You don’t know when to give up, do you?”

Ginny stuck out her chin, smiling arrogantly. “I’m a redhead – the cojones of an African Elephant are part of the package.”

“God... you’re such a perv. Well, sit down then if you want.” Rose moved over on the window seat, while Ginny threw herself next to her, grabbing a cushion. They were in Hogwarts’ very own Hall of Mirrors – Uncle Sirius once assured her that it had been built by a scion of French royalty, who for some twisted reason of his own, decided to construct a Hall of Mirrors, paralleling the one in the Palace of Versailles, in Hogwarts of all places. Not Beauxbatons, as you might have expected. Hogwarts. Rose liked to sit here, sometimes, because it was beautiful and usually deserted – most people seemed intimidated by its size and all those mirrors. Like they were afraid they’d see their true, twisted, tainted selves in one of those mirrors, if they looked at them for too long.

“I’ve been searching for you throughout this whole damn castle,” Ginny whined, running her fingers through her long, red hair. Rose had frequently envied Ginny’s beautiful hair. Still did, in fact. Red was such a Gryffindor color, and though Rose loved her House, she’d never truly been reconciled to the fact that she wasn’t a Gryffindor, as she’d envisaged herself for years.

“What would you say if I said I loved you?” Rose asked, playing with the diary. “That I loved your beauty – your hair especially. Your fire and spirit, your lack of self-preservation, your freedom to say what

you wanted, without having to suffer the consequences? Your immaturity, your lack of anxiety, your headstrongness? What would you say if I said I was just a pale imitation of you? That Rose Potter was just pretending to be Ginny Weasley, that there was nothing to Rose Potter except a jumbled hodgepodge of different personalities from different people? That she wasn't her own person, just her father and godfather and her mother and a generic Gryffindor-Slytherin blend all combined... that she was just another character in a bigger story who'd die and be mourned and forgotten, without leaving any impact behind?"

Ginny took a good, long, hard look at her before calmly replying, "I'd say you were drunk."

"Bitch," Rose replied, without any venom, smiling slightly.

"Whore," Ginny returned, slapping Rose's knee playfully. "God, you need a simple, uncomplicated Gryff, like me, to cheer you up. How's life living under the lake?"

"Oh, fine. Just fine," Rose said, leaning against the windowpane. "Is there any special reason you wanted to talk with me?"

"We're friends, aren't we? We've known each other since we were six," Ginny asked, sounding a little annoyed. "Can't I just talk to you, without a reason? Don't turn into one of those cold Slyths, Rose."

"I'll try not to," Rose said, wondering what precisely she had said that had annoyed Ginny so much. Cold? She wasn't cold, not at all.

"But yeah," Ginny continued, a frown darkening her face. "There is something I wanted to talk to you about – Nevy and brother dearest."

Rose groaned inwardly. She ought to have expected this from Ginny, but she'd hoped the topic wouldn't be brought up, she wouldn't have to think up excuses to satisfy her – she couldn't just tell her the truth, well, not without any strings attached, – and she could continue to pretend the world was alright, that nothing was wrong.

"You've got this cold war going on with them."

“Ron’s mad I sicced a bench onto Patil,” Rose said sharply. “I’m giving him time to come around to the fact that I was in the right and she deserved it.”

Ginny gasped. “You don’t actually believe that!”

“Of course, I’m sorry she got hurt so badly – still, she’s alright now, isn’t she, so I shouldn’t even be sorry for that. But she was just... ugh.”

“Ugh? *Ugh*?! Rose Iris Potter, that doesn’t give you any right to throw a bench on anyone!” Ginny said shrilly.

“It’s more than ugh,” Rose said quietly. “I had my reasons for, um, siccing a bench on her. You have no idea how she treats Ron, Ginny – like a doormat, that’s what. And she’s so conceited and full of herself. Behind that pretty face, she’s just another mega-bitch who wants to take advantage of Ron. I tried to stand her last year, and I might have kept calm this year too, but then she attacked me too and I wasn’t in a good mood – no, I was mad, I’d just had a fight with Neville – and well, things came to a head and...” She trailed off. “Maybe it wasn’t the time or place for it, but if I was in the same position right now, I’d do the same thing.” She nodded firmly, to reinforce her point.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course, I am,” Rose said sharply. “Of course, I am.”

Ginny’s face hardened, her deep brown eyes flashing. “What about Neville? You two are pretty cool to each other nowadays.”

“Extraneous reasons,” Rose muttered, and at Ginny’s questioning look elaborated, “Stuff you have no right to hear.”

“Is it about Blaise Zabini?” Ginny asked, eyes narrowing. “Didn’t you three have a fight in...?”

“Last week’s news,” Rose said dismissively. “Yes, partially about him. We’ve been having a fight over a... well, over a certain object that

does not concern you. I'll bitchslap you, if you ask any more stupid questions."

She'd said the last bit playfully, but Ginny's eyes only narrowed further. "Zabini's a horrible guy!" she burst out, looking indignant. "He's not worth fighting over, Rose! You and Neville, you've been best friends for ages, don't tell me you're breaking up over that sick prat!"

"We're not a couple or anything," Rose said crossly. "So there's no question of breaking up. We're friends, not joined at the hip."

"What about best friends?" Ginny demanded. "Rose, there's something wrong with you, I can't put my finger on it, not yet, at least, but it's there and- and ..."

Rose threw the diary into the air absently and caught it when it fell, swinging her legs. "Don't be so thick, *Ginevra*."

"I'm not! It's just you, you're the one who's so..."

"So what?" Rose said, not looking at Ginny, still throwing and catching the diary. "I'm fine. I'm giving Ron time to get used to the fact that I'm *not* sorry for what I did. I'm okay with Neville."

"What about Zabini?" Ginny asked harshly. "Don't tell me you're fine with that pest too? Rose, you know how —"

*God, how tactless. If I didn't hate Blaise already, I'd probably start liking him just to show her, she doesn't control who I'm friends with!* "Oh for Agrippa's sake, shut the hell up!" Rose snapped. She lost concentration and failed to catch the diary, which she'd just thrown into the air. It slammed into the marble floor and the sound echoed, oddly menacing, through the huge, empty hall.

Ginny gaped at her, mouth hanging wide open. Since she wasn't Blaise, she didn't remember to shut it either.

Rose bent and picked up the diary, cradling it in her lap. She wanted to say more, lots more, ask Ginny Weasley just where, exactly, she got off... but she restrained herself. Sometimes, less was more.

Ginny was still gaping at her, hurt filling her large brown eyes. Rose felt no resentment for it – instead, she felt glad. Served that little harpy right, she deserved it. And if she thought *Rose* was going to apologize, she was sadly mistaken. Rose only apologized to her parents, Neville, and Ron. End of the list.

Ginny stood up awkwardly, her long, red hair brushing her pale, little face, and walked out of the hall. Rose heard her footsteps echo quietly on the marble floor, all the way down the hall.

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“It sounds like they’re really seriously considering those renovation plans in the curriculum.”

Pansy and Tracey walked into the girls’ dormitory, their arms resting on each other’s shoulders, chatting brightly. Rose, wrapped in emerald-green silk coverlets, emblazoned with silver snakes, looked up from Quidditch through the Ages. It was almost ten o’clock, and Pansy and Tracey were the last ones to enter the dorms – Millicent was just dozing off and Daphne was writing a letter to her mother.

“Hogwash,” Daphne said calmly, without glancing up from her letter. “Tripe.”

“Oh, I don’t think so!” Tracey squealed. “Roger says...”

“And I’ve just had a letter from Mamma –” Pansy began.

“Your mother would certainly be one to know,” Daphne said, her voice as tranquil and toneless as ever. “Let me see – why yes, wasn’t your grandmother a half-blood?”

At this, Rose’s head shot up and she saw Pansy’s sallow face flush angrily and her fists ball up. Tracey, looking frightened, tapped timidly on Pansy’s shoulder, whispering something in a low voice to her. But Pansy shook her off impatiently, her dark eyes flashing. “At least no one in my immediate family has been sentenced to Azkaban, in shame and disgrace!”



Daphne put down her quill and finally looked up at Pansy, her face quite calm. "Neither has anyone in mine, really. My father had the privilege to be taken down in battle – yours could not ever dream to aspire to such an honor."

Pansy's mouth opened and closed very fast. She looked like a fish gasping for water. "You call it an honor?" she finally managed, her voice a hoarse whisper.

"Narcissa Malfoy would call it that," Daphne said, looking supremely unruffled. "Pansy Iolanthe Parkinson, let me make one thing clear to you – you will never be accepted as a suitable Malfoy bride. You are not worthy to be the daughter-in-law of a former Black. My advice to you, therefore, is to stop chasing Draco. It will do you no good."

"So, you can have him all to yourself, that's your plan, isn't it! Well, let me tell you something, you..."

"A Greengrass and a Parkinson. Now really, my dear, tell me can there be any comparison between them?" Daphne smiled faintly, folding her letter. She stood up and swept towards her bed, nodding politely at Tracey.

Pansy's mouth hardened, but she said nothing as she stormed towards the bathroom, nightgown and beauty pack in hand.

Rose grabbed Tracey, before the latter could move towards her bed, and dragged her down, until her mouth was at Tracey's ear level. "What was that about?" she hissed.

Tracey gently pried her wrist out of Rose's grasp and flopped down on her bed. "Daphne's in a bad mood," she said very quietly, "partly about the way Pansy's always fawning over Draco, and partly about, well, Asteria. Her half-sister, you know."

"Asteria...?" Rose asked questioningly.

"First-year, Ravenclaw," Tracey explained briefly. "Don't you remember at the Sorting? She's part-Veela. Romulus Lestrange – that's her cousin – told her Asteria's been mixing with Gryffindors. And you know how Daphne considers the Gryffs..."

“Like vermin,” Rose grimaced. “Vermin to be condescended to, when met, but to be despised always. God, she’s just another Pureblood prototype, even if she’s so polite to everyone... damned bigot.”

“Well,” Tracey said, her voice measured. “Daphne *does* have a lot to be proud of – her mother was a Lestranger, and you know about their bloodline, and the Greengrasses are at *least* as pure as the Malfoys and Macmillans, and then there’s the wealth factor to be considered and...”

“I understand,” Rose grinned. “She’s just another stereotypical Slytherin, just the type that gives my House a bad name. Don’t you think it’s horrible that, no matter how we try, we’re always categorized into those little House clichés, just because *some* people go on propagating them?”

“Prejudiced Slyths, nerdy Claws, thick-headed Gryffs, and angelic Puffs?” Tracey asked, smiling a little now. “You tell me who those people who believe those clichés are, and I’ll introduce them to my brother! Roger – a nerd? Hah – why, even a Veela would fall for him, he’s so gorgeous!”

“And what about Hermione Granger?” Rose grinned. “She’s annoying, but thick-headed? *Please*. Though, I do think Smith balances her out... I’ve never seen anyone as dim as him.”

“And just think about Cedric Diggory!” Tracey giggled, now warming up to the subject. “Angelic? He’s very sweet, but did you know, it really was him who put those Nifflers in Professor Lockhart’s office? Not Towler of Gryffindor like everyone says – it was really Cedric, Roger told me.”

“Wicked,” Rose said.

“And as for prejudiced Slytherins – what about you and me and Milli and Neville and... well, there are loads of halfbloods and even Purebloods, who don’t care a bit about those things!”

“But for every person who doesn’t, there are two who do,” Rose said sadly. “It’s like we’ll always be labeled mean and nasty if we’re Slytherins or can-do-no-wrong if we’re Hufflepuffs... it’s not fair. I

mean, yeah, your House matters a lot, but that doesn't mean that... ugh, I get so confused sometimes." She thought about the diary, tucked inside her drawer. She'd spent a long time writing to it, today. It certainly made for interesting conversations.

"It doesn't, does it?" Tracey asked absently, as the bathroom door opened and Pansy, freshly attired in a flowered, silk nightgown swept in, the scent of jasmines trailing behind her. Pansy even wore perfume to bed. "Well, I'd better change – it's pretty late. Sweet dreams, Rose."

"You too, Tracey," Rose said, smiling at the other girl and blowing out the candles with her wand.

**A/N: Yes, I know it's been a long time. Been busy editing the First Year – kudos to Desiqtie! I've added a new Chapter 1 and 2 too, so you might want to check them out. Also, you might not be able to leave a signed review for the next ten chapters – anonymous reviews will work – as I've deleted/combined-into-other-chapters many of the earlier chapters.**

**To Amy: Thanks for the awesome review! Anger management classes coming up... well almost. And Rose isn't going to be the only one there – you'll meet several more characters whom I hope you'll find interesting. Most fingers will not be pointing towards her for the simple reason that she's only twelve – c'mon, would you really suspect a nice little twelve-year-old if you're say, sixteen or seventeen? – and because there are other slightly-crazy kids at Hogwarts. Actually she's fairly harmless compared to them. Yes, it was stupid of her to do it. People do stupid things when they're angry – yelling at other people is normal. Siccing a bench isn't, but she wasn't at all in control of herself then. It's not a justification of her actions; she really didn't think and realize that it was stupid before acting on her impulse.**

**To SRFan!!: Not just James Potter, everyone's pretty hacked up about her escaping. The trial scene of the others involved in the case – there are more, though Bellatrix was the ringleader – will be in the next chapter or the one after that. The parents are so**

stressed that they don't even have the time to dish out a nice, venomous Howler! Dumbledore wrote a 'special' letter to her parents – with ramifications concerning the new therapist who IS going to come to Hogwarts – and Rose only received very stern letters from her parents, because of that. I love The Alchemist, it's a lovable book!

To kike: Lol, my little brother is very fond of Pokemon too! Sinister and complex... mmm, and we've only just started Second Year. XD

## ***At the Crossroads***

*A man's life is always at a crossroads. And not his life alone, if he is a man. Always others in the balance.*

### **King Rat, James Clavell**

Endless rain, wind that seemed to blow him away; tornadoes, gales, clouds as dark as night. Peals of thunder that made the firmaments tremble, lightning striking everywhere, endless motion and no way to stop it. Ragged by storm, wind, and rain, he looked down and, beyond sheets of mist and vapor, saw a ravaged landscape. Rivers of red streamed down the black earth.

*Blood streaming down skin burnt black. A piercing scream, the earth itself trembling, while blood coursed down the blackened remains of something that had once been alive and human. Blood seeping through cracks in the door, chinks in the ceiling, slipping through the window frames. Grotesque murals formed on the walls, the ceiling, the floor, staining everything he could see a brilliant red.*

*Thunder and screams mingled in one wild cacophony, while the rain poured down on a war-savaged land and blood along blackened corpses...*

"Shh..."

It was Lily, he groggily realized, trying to shake the sleep from his weary eyes. His throat ached, as though he'd been screaming for hours, but he hadn't, he'd just been sleeping and he tried to tell Lily he was fine, he was okay, she should get some sleep, and what time is it, by the way, and, oh God, I'm just fine...

He'd hardly opened his mouth before she shook her head, shifting the little pink bundle in her arms. There was a pair of frightened hazel eyes peeping up at him from the doorframe, he noticed.

"I-I..." he began, and then stopped abruptly at the kindly – but pitying, oh yes, pitying – look in her eyes. "Where are my glasses?" he finished.

She sighed and turned around without answering his question. “Harry, dear, can you please get me the glass of water in your bedroom? I think Dad might need it,” she said, tucking a strand of auburn hair behind her ear, “And try to get some sleep too after you’re done – shh, there’s nothing the matter. He’s just had an, er, bad dream. No, it doesn’t mean anything. He’ll be fine, there now. Could you please get me the glass?”

The hazel eyes disappeared and he heard light footsteps padding away from the door, down the dark hallway. “It was Sirius,” James whispered, rubbing his eyes and falling back against the small mountain of soft, squashy pillows that he could not sleep without. “Lily, we’ve got to-”

“Sirius is fine,” she said softly, sitting down on the bed, Snidget still in her arms. “We are not sending him an owl in the middle of the night.”

“I saw-” he began, trying to explain everything to her, to show her it wasn’t as light a matter as she considered it, it was *serious*, they needed to do something, and where were his glasses, by the way? He needed his glasses, and they needed to owl Siri, they had to, just to make sure...

“You saw *nothing*. It was a nightmare. You have them all the time. There’s absolutely nothing oracular about them,” Lily said firmly, a steely note in her voice. “Now I suggest that – ah yes, Harry. Thank you.”

Harry was standing in the doorway, a glass of water in his hand, his glasses askew, and a frightened look on his face. “Is Uncle Padfoot okay?” he whispered. *Damn*, James thought belatedly, *we really do need to put wards against eavesdroppers on all the rooms*.

“Yes,” Lily said quickly. Too quickly, actually. Her words had no effect on Harry, who didn’t seem in the least reassured by them.

“Dad?” Harry said, his voice still a whisper, as though he were scared to talk any louder. “Dad, is he?”

James took in the wide, frightened hazel eyes, the trembling, little mouth and fingers and scrounged up a comforting smile – even

though he felt naked, unarmed without his glasses and wand; it was two in the morning and he was almost as afraid as Harry. No matter what time of day or night it was, if you were a dad you always had to have a reassuring smile ready. “Yes, everything’s fine, Harry,” he said, trying out his best warm-and-fatherly tone, “I just had a bad dream – nice of you two to wake me up. Er, yes, can I have the water, please?”

Harry padded towards the bed, his face still a bit scared. “Is Ron going to be alright, today?” he asked. In answer to James’ questioning look, he quickly said, “Today’s the sixteenth, Dad.”

*The 16th of October. Wait a minute... today’s the trial!* “He will,” Lily answered for James. “He’s not even attending the trial – he’ll be at Hogwarts, Harry. Zacharias Smith and Susan Bones are though, I think you should be worried about them,” she added playfully.

Harry stood there for a moment, looking uncertain, and then turned around suddenly. “Debacle’s coming,” he said, and a plump golden cat padded in. After a month of dithering over names and pouring over a thesaurus, Harry had finally decided that the name “Debacle” would work excellently for a cat who’s only purpose in life – or so it seemed to James – was to hiss and spit at everyone who tried to pet him and act as Harry’s shadow. James didn’t like the cat for reasons he couldn’t understand – though Snidget and Harry adored him. The way it looked at him sometimes was just... sinister.

“You’d better get to sleep,” Lily said absently, frowning slightly at Debacle. Sometimes he wondered whether she felt the same way about the cat. “Go on now.”

Yawning sleepily, Harry picked up his cat and obediently trotted out of the room. As soon as the two were gone and Lily had shut the door, James finally spoke up. “Something’s going to happen – something...” he began and sighed when Lily raised her eyebrows at him. “Can you please stop looking at me like I’m an earthworm?”

“Only someone with the brain size of an earthworm would scream things like that out in his sleep,” Lily said slowly, cuttingly. “You haven’t been taking that antidote Healer Smythesson prescribed, have you?”

"I have," he said quickly, defensively. When her eyebrows shot up even higher, he grumbled, "Well, maybe not that regularly, but at least once a week..."

"More like once a month," Lily said harshly, annoyance flicking over her face. "Do you think a seven-year-old *wants* to hear secrets like that being bawled out by his father in the dead of night? Do you think I want to? God, James, if you were in enemy hands tonight... well, lets not even get into the details of where top Ministry secrets would end up, shall we? That antidote was recommended for a reason. It's your *duty* to drink it every single bloody night, understand?"

"It was that bad?" he winced. "What did I say?"

Lily glowered at him and hissed, "I'll give you a hint. You mentioned Umbridge, Ramsey, and Skeeter. You *were* starting on Crouch and the Dumbledore-Longbottom connection, but we managed to wake you up before you got further than the word 'death warrant'. Thank God, Harry's only seven – if he'd actually *understood* what you were babbling on about... well, just think about what would happen if Neville received a letter from him about Crouch and Dumbledore."

"He wouldn't have understood," James said quickly, trying to defend himself. "He's just Rose's age."

"He's twelve," Lily said flatly. "Think about the things you found out when we were twelve. He's just a year from being thirteen, and just think about the things I did when I was thirteen."

James lay back against the pillows, staring at Snidget's little face. Apparently she'd slept through it all. He couldn't have screamed out so much if Snidget, who woke up at the slightest provocation, was still asleep. Lily just made a fuss over little things. "Everyone knows about Umbridge and Skeeter," he said sullenly. "After all, she *is* Ramsey's aunt – and the woman was a Hufflepuff. I bet she'd do anything for her precious niece."

"Stop trying to justify yourself," Lily said roughly. "We were entrusted with particular secrets for a special reason – so that we could pass them on when the time was right."



"I didn't *know* I was screaming out stuff in my nightmares, I mean, of course, I wouldn't say these things to anyone, it just kind of happened..."

"What about the antidote? Don't tell me you don't know that you have to take it every night."

"Yeah well, it tastes yuck," James said foolishly, feeling like a five-year-old.

Lily obviously thought he was acting like a five-year-old because she just glared at him and said, in the same tone she used when Harry or Rose misbehaved, "Go to sleep now."

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"I wonder what people would say if they found out you'd been bribing Rita Skeeter," Sirius Black said conversationally. He stared out at the velvety-black sky, stitched with stars, from the top of the famous Observatory of Prague. The Czech Republic was obsessed with stars and sky-watching, as the many, many observatories, scattered across the small country, bore testimony to. There was even an official club of Sky-Watchers. Sky-Watchers, of all things. In fact, they were actually *proud* of being called Sky-Watchers, and even had their own badges and uniforms... *There's never a limit to geekiness, is there?*

"I haven't been bribing anyone," Porcia Ramsey's voice was tight, tetchy. She leaned against the railing and drained what Sirius fervently hoped was her last cup of coffee. Sure coffee was lovely and a few cups of it to keep you alert, bright, and cheery at two in the morning never hurt... but thirty-one cups? *Honestly.*

"Dear Auntie Dory, then," Sirius said, wondering whether Porcia would decide to start in on her thirty-second cup. Two hours ago, he'd thought it was a brilliant idea to Apparate her across the continent – she would enjoy the view from the observatory, and besides, what better way to calm down, the night before a trial, than to watch stars from the top of a two-hundred foot tower, hmm? *Get a good night's sleep, perhaps*, James would have suggested, but then James was an old-fashioned, conservative soul (though, of course, nobody would

ever dare tell him that to his face). Sirius, like three-quarters of those born into the House of Black, was an insomniac. The only way he ever got a good night's sleep was by downing at least a cauldron ladle's worth of Taper's Premium Sleeping Potion. But even a cauldron ladle's worth would have no effect if his nerves were too wrought-up, and it was dangerous to have more than that.

Porcia, he'd learnt, after she'd 'borrowed' his precious Sleeping Potion (and emptied half of it in three nights), suffered the same problem as him, though he was pretty sure she hadn't inherited it. It had seemed like a good idea at midnight to watch the stars and bond over his sleeping problems (not in *that* way, of course) with a fellow sufferer. Of course, that was before he'd known she was a coffee-addict, hated star watching (she'd received a T in her Astronomy O.W.L), and had the temper of a paranoid-with-a-reason Moody after one in the morning.

She twirled her wand lightly and her thirty-second cup of coffee materialized in her hand. "I can't help it if I have excellent connections," she said sulkily, taking a sip from it. "And I certainly can't help it if all my relatives love me."

"Poor you," Sirius said sympathetically. "I would be reduced to slitting my wrists and penning elegies about how my life sucked if all my relatives loved me."

"And I'd turn into a psychopathic serial killer if I had your relatives," Porcia said testily, the ghost of a smile on her face.

"But you *do* have my relatives," Sirius insisted. "I mean, let's look at it this way – your, um, great grand-aunt married a Crabbe, and they had Irma Crabbe, who was my grandmother. And let's look at it from another angle too, your great-uncle seduced a Selwyn, and then they had-"

Porcia's lips twitched as she took a sip from her coffee. "Don't tell me you've been keeping up with Nature's Nobility."

"My mother used to make me memorize the family trees as soon as I could read," he said seriously. "She taught my little brother Regulus to say *Toujours Pur*, as a greeting to guests, before he turned two.

Funny isn't it, how you never can forget the stuff you were forced to learn when you were three or four? The alphabet, for instance."

"Or the faces of people you were told were important?" Porcia asked, running her finger around the rim of her cup. "I still remember that charming cousin of yours. One summer, Grandmother took me to one of your Aunt Druella's soirees, when I was five – lots of children there, you know. She'd passed her O.W.Ls that year, and I remember her patting my head and saying she hoped I'd find an, er, suitable bridegroom someday." She smiled wanly before adding, "She was very beautiful. Somehow, doesn't it seem like, well... all the pretty people cause the most damage?"

"You can do just about anything if you're gorgeous enough," Sirius said absently, without even thinking about himself.

Porcia chuckled, and stretched against the railings. For a moment, as he watched her body arc against the steel, her head suspended for a second in inky-black nothingness, he wondered how long a person would take to die if he were thrown off the tower. Would he die whilst still in free fall? Or would his life end as his body was shattered against the stone pavement two hundred feet below? How much blood would there be? Would his insides split open and be splattered on the stones?

Porcia was saying something. "...What about everyone who's not gorgeous? There are a lot of people like that, you know."

"They'll have to depend on their brains to get them through," he said.

"What if their brains aren't good enough to get them through?"

"Fortune, connections – that sort of thing," Sirius said, wondering why she was asking him this. Perhaps all that coffee – not to mention the amount of Sleeping Potion she seemed to take in such alarmingly large amounts – had taken their toll on her brain...

Porcia tsked, softly. "You mean wealth and family, right?"

"Well, yeah," Sirius said, without even thinking. He waved his hand airily, "you know what I mean."

A smile – half-amused, half-disdainful – tugged on her lips. “It’s hard to let go of family, isn’t it?” she asked. “No matter who you are, you’ll never forget the curse of your birth. Oh, I don’t mean *you* in particular, but... well, I guess you’re more Black than I ever thought you’d be.”

“What?” Sirius demanded, instantly on the alert, a little stung by her scornful smile and tone.

*“Fortune, connections – that sort of thing,”* Porcia mimicked. “Basically, you’re aping the propaganda you’ve been raised up to believe in.”

“I’m not-” he began, but stopped abruptly. Instead of flat-out denying it, dismissing her comment, or meeting it with a counter-argument, an excuse, a joke, he paused to think it over. If it was phrased politely enough, Sirius was always willing to consider criticism or advice (whether he worked on it being a different matter), and to admit that he had been wrong – it was one of the things that distinguished him from many people. So he pondered over her words, before saying, “You’re right, I guess – old habits, especially bad ones, die hard.” He smiled charmingly at her to indicate that he hadn’t minded her words.

She nodded and twirled her wand and her thirty-third cup of coffee materialized. *Good grief.* “I suppose they do,” she said calmly, sipping it. Sirius’ lips twitched in amusement – he would bet a thousand Galleons she’d missed the irony of her action.

**000**

Varinia Crouch shoved the brambles, the branches viciously out of her way, holding her lit wand aloft. She walked within a narrow circle of light – light too dim, too narrow to alleviate the darkness that surrounded her. No stars twinkled down at her, no bright moon smiled, and the oppressive, ominous silence pressed heavily down on her like a weight. She would have shivered in suspense, crossed herself – it was an old family tradition, even though she had no idea what it was supposed to mean, just that it brought good luck – if she hadn’t already been wild with terror and dread and most of all desperation.

*Funny, really, the things a mother will do for her child.*

She was born of a line that bred its daughters to be porcelain dolls, trophies behind glass cases, ornaments to brighten old mansions. She was meant to be sweet, docile, and charming. Then why was she, Varinia Rosier Crouch, wandering through the Forest of Dean in the dead of night?

*Anything for my son.*

Her face, meshed in shadow and light, was a beautiful façade. Long, golden hair glistened even in the faint light, while the keen, blue eyes shone with near-authentic serenity. The pale, delicately flowerlike face seemed smooth, untroubled. She was just another actress in the great sham of life, smiling sweetly out at the masquerade behind her façade, just another mother who would have died for her son. She was a mother, and the strength and purity of her love overruled her personal convictions, her principles, and the boundaries of morality. Fate and destiny, right and wrong... how could they ever hope to triumph over a mother's love?

"What a pleasure to see you here tonight, dear cousin."

The husky voice was playful tonight, a purr behind the words. Varinia heard the slither of cloth over dry leaves, before she felt a wand being pressed hard against her throat. She backed quickly into a tree, her shoulders tight against the bark, as her wand was pulled out of her hand. The light from its tip was extinguished by a low word from the other woman, and then she stood in the impenetrable darkness, held at wand-point by a murderess.

The other woman's voice was almost sweet, teasing, as she said, "I hope you didn't tell anyone about this rendezvous? No? What a good, little girl you have been, then."

"Beloved cousin," Varinia began, making her voice weak, helpless, supplicating. It was for a woman to be soft and demure, she had been taught, to bow under stronger, more masculine forces.

"Quiet," the other woman said, her voice suddenly sharp. Her wand jabbed harder into Varinia's throat and she winced in pain. There was a pause, pregnant with meaning, and then the other woman began

again. “Give me your hand, yes, like that. You will visit Lucius and Rodolphus then, with this. They will understand.”

Something cold and small – a ring maybe – fell into Varinia’s outstretched palm.

“And now, my dear, since we have very little time to waste, I suggest we proceed with the formalities. Kneel.”

The wand was drawn back from her throat and, obediently, Varinia sank to her knees. Gracefully, of course, she was always graceful. Her voluminous, black skirts blossomed, lily-pad-like, around her, and she slipped the ring on her finger.

“Stretch out your hand. It’s a pity we haven’t three people, no? An Unbreakable Vow isn’t really one without three – we shall have to resort to cruder methods to guarantee your loyalty. Pity.”

“No guarantee is required,” Varinia said timidly, worried that she would offend the other woman. “I am a Rosier by birth – is that not sufficient safeguard for my honor?”

“Blood means much,” the other woman drawled, contempt laced in her voice. “But not everything – to whom do you owe your allegiance? Your father and brothers or your husband?”

“To my son,” Varinia whispered, feeling stronger as she said his name, “Bartemius. He is everything to me, B-”

“No names!” the woman screeched, and, suddenly, something hard and heavy slammed violently into Varinia’s cheek. She opened her mouth, in reflex, to scream, but no sound came out and she understood that a Silencing Charm had been placed on her – apparently simultaneously with the other spell. Her heart thudded in her chest, in terror of the woman, no the creature, before her. For the first time, the risks she was taking dawned on her. The means had seemed to justify the ends, before – still did, now, yes, Barty mattered more than anything else, and she’d do *anything* for him – but... what Pandora’s chest had she unknowingly opened?

Zacharias Smith picked at his breakfast, not hungry. The toast which Miss Ramsey had solicitously buttered for him – and he *hated* butter, though, of course, he hadn't told her that – tasted like sawdust. Iced pumpkin juice was fine – but five ice-cubes for a single cup? Ugh. The omelet was too bland – and goddamn, there weren't even any chilies in sight. You could get chilies at Hogwarts, so why not at the Ministry? Maybe Uncle Emmerich was right – *the Ministry is going to the dogs*. And the muffins... well, the less said about them, the better.

No, he wasn't a picky eater, not at all; he was just a... connoisseur of food. Yes, that sounded nice – he was a *gourmand*. And what gourmand in his right mind could be expected to consume the fare provided by the Ministry? Mmm-hmm – no gourmand worth his salt. Or pepper. Or whatever.

He looked across the small, stone antechamber in which he, Ron, and Susan had to wait before the trial started. *The trial*. The pit of his stomach churned uncomfortably and, for a moment, he felt like projectile vomiting. It had been a habit of his, when he was smaller, to throw up under even the slightest excitement – Mummy had been sympathetic and understanding about his plight, but when Uncle Emmerich had found out about it...

*"You should be ashamed to call yourself a man."*

*"You are a dishonor to your name and lineage, a dishonor to me. I despise you."*

*"Effeminate! That's what you are, you young rogue."*

Susan was eating a muffin and reading the Daily Prophet. Ron, sitting opposite her at the table, was drumming his fingers on his knees, a tense, strained look on his face. *Good to know someone else is as scared as me*, Zacharias thought, relieved that he wasn't the only one who wanted to projectile vomit. And then he wondered again, about Susan, so calmly reading the Prophet, her body language so relaxed, at ease – just what the hell was wrong with her?

*"If you can keep your head about you when all the rest are losing there's, then it's just possible you might not have fully grasped the situation yet."*

Susan was odd, just like Ron was. Of course, he, Zacharias, wasn't odd. No, not at all – he considered himself far more normal than either of the others. Maybe not as normal as well, you know, more normal people like... well, like maybe Seamus or Ernie Macmillan – people who hadn't seen their parents' dead bodies when they were six – but, yeah, he was more normal than a psycho like Rose. Ron was a doormat – a very nice, friendly one, but a doormat all the same who let girls like Padma and Rose walk all over him as they pleased – and Susan was... well, robotic. She reminded him more than a little of the first snows of winter – soft, cold, immaculate, almost unearthly. She said the right things to the right people, never seemed worried or scared or hungry or bored, and then there was always that enigmatic smile on her face – like she knew a dirty secret about you and was amused at it.

Today there was a supplement to the Daily Prophet, a pamphlet containing the bios of the victims, the attackers, the casualties, and everyone who was working on the case. Anyone who didn't know by now – and Zacharias was certain there were very few of them – would finally understand today that it was one of the biggest trials in at least half-a-century. If not more. At first, he had glanced at the two pages devoted to him – delighted to see his name published in such big letters on a newspaper that would be read by so many people – but then he'd caught sight of the old picture of his parents and hastily put it down.

He hated looking at pictures of them. It reminded him of just how much he'd lost and made him feel, in an odd way, lonely, and then ashamed of his loneliness. Loneliness was for the weak of heart – no true man, Uncle Emmerich once told him, feared isolation. Zacharias did, with a passion. He was afraid of being alone – literally, not spiritually alone, without anyone nearby – for too long, and he knew why too. It was all because of that day.

Being petrified – not scared, *petrified* – of being alone wasn't normal, and though Zacharias didn't particularly want to be normal, he didn't want to be abnormal either. The skull-shaped scar, still as starkly black as ever against his pale forehead, tainted him for life, just like it tainted Ron and Susan. He looked across the room, at Ron curled up on his chair, the golden lamplight glinting off his red hair, at Susan,



her legs folded at the ankle, her thick, black hair flowing down her back and wondered whether he really was more normal than them. And even if he was – did it really matter in the end?

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Bartemius Crouch sat in his roughly hewn, granite throne, his back ramrod straight and his chin thrust out. His hands were shackled to the arms of his chair and his legs bound in metal chains to the legs of his fellow captives. Underneath the glare of a thousand lights, the silent but palpable fury and loathing of a packed atrium – packed and even ‘beyond capacity’, both being misnomers –, flashbulbs blinking, bodies jostling, the heat, the unchannelled (though still, voiceless) anger of the mob almost a creature in itself, it would have befitted him to be meek and humble. To look down and most of all, to avoid the eyes of the man who sat in the highest chair on the judges’ balcony.

It would have befitted him, this young man not yet thirty, the crowd seethed, to express contrition in some – or any, really – form. To not look brazenly, coldly up at them as though they were vermin, which he would have liked to crush. *Vermin. Why the nerve of him... and when you considered those poor, dear children up there... terrible, terrible...*

Varinia Crouch, her face as white and grey-veined as her marble-patterned, silk robes, stood next to her pregnant daughter-in-law – there was no sitting room left, except for the judges and a few others – and wrapped her arm tightly around the younger woman’s heavily bulging stomach. Philippa Yaxley leaned her head, the dark curls spilling out of her untidy chignon, on her mother-in-law’s shoulder, her young, lovely face worn with the agony of months of waiting, watching, weeping. He had killed and tortured, maimed and scared families and individuals, but his wife and mother would never see him as anything but their darling, their angel.

Zacharias Smith’s eyes followed the pair – the blond, elderly woman, whom he knew to be the Minister’s wife, and the pretty, dark-haired one, who was still young enough for him to harbor something of a crush on her – and he followed their eyes. And he couldn’t help but wonder what the man – the Minister’s son, the one who had slashed

open his mother's body six years ago – they looked at, had done, to merit their love.

Susan Bones sat beside him quietly, as dignified and composed as the Minister himself, her chest barely rising with the breaths she took. Her eyes stood fixed, chips of ice, on Travers, chained to young Crouch, and as she looked she remembered how he'd tossed her two-year-old brother into the air and cast a *Cruciatus* on him, while he was still suspended mid-air. In the dim, flickering light cast by the scones on the stone walls, she looked like a statue, seeping hatred, like some silent, impartial, but brutal, nemesis.

From the stone pit where the spectators jostled together, Porcia Ramsey mopped her brow, wet with sweat, and stared across the atrium at handsome Sirius Black. Her heart fluttered, and, once again, she was the scrawny, malicious, thirteen-year-old schoolgirl – funny, really, how different she was now, overweight instead of anorexic, though she was pretty sure she was as malicious as ever – neck-deep in love with the seventeen-year-old school heartthrob. Nymphadora Tonks brushed elbows briefly with her, muttered an apology without seeing the older woman's face, and stood up on tiptoes, trying to get a better look at Neil Dey.

Ron Weasley sat with his elbows propped up on the stone bar in front of him, next to Zacharias. He caught a flash of brilliant, bubble-gum pink hair in the pit below and wondered whether it was Tonks going wild with her hair again – blimey, her mum wouldn't be pleased. He felt a pent-up, burning, bubbling excitement and he wanted badly, very badly to hit something. Was this how Rose felt when she was near breaking point? He felt claustrophobic, tied up, sick, and ill because he had to bottle up his feelings – *how does Susan manage?* – and he wasn't used to bottling up his feelings, because his feelings were never strong enough to take control of him completely. He was scared – not of the captives below – but of himself. Of all the people who were looking at him, gawking, whispering in low voices – though he could hear snatches of their conversation, *The poor, sweet little thing with red hair – what a dear...*

He was twelve, for fuck's sake. Wasn't it time people stopped calling him sweet and dear and little? Nobody called Zacharias – at the truly

impressive height of five-four, well, impressive for a twelve-year-old, and with his hard, mean leer – or Rose – with her eyes flashing fire, more often than not, and insolent grin – those things.

He wished the trial would start. He wished so very, very badly. But more than that, he wished for Rose and Neville. For unquestioning, infallible love, for arms wrapped tightly, securely around his shoulders, and bolstering, playful wisecracks.

“And I declare the court open!”

The gavel slammed into the wood.

**A/N: Yes, I had writer's block. Yes, there's a reference to Tamora Pierce way up in this chapter. And no, for everyone who's read Take Seven and this and is trying to put two and two together, Emmerich Smith has not raped/sexually harassed/physically abused Zacharias. XD Review!**

## ***By Fits and Faints***

*And if I could save you, and if I could find a solution,  
I would die a thousand times, to get you out of here.*

## **Warsaw 1943 (I Never Betrayed The Revolution) - Johnny Clegg**

Ron Weasley skulked in the shadows, hoping to avoid attention by this maneuver. He was forced to concede two minutes later, when he was unable to escape unwanted notice in the thronging crowd of students headed to the Great Hall, enticed by the scent of dinner, that it was a foolish hope. His flame-red hair and his face, which had been splashed so generously over national and international newspapers and magazines for the past fortnight, seemed to be a magnet, inviting people to stare and whisper among themselves, “Oh, the poor *dear*.”

It was really, really getting old.

It had been bad enough at the trial, being greeted by Bill’s last girlfriend, Livia Hargrove (now a beautiful, eminently crush-worthy, young woman), throwing herself at him and crying, “Oh, you poor darling! You look just like your brother, sweetheart!”

Zacharias, with his usual, completely humiliating lack of tact, had promptly burst out laughing and elbowed Ron in the ribs whispering (well, *he* considered it whispering though practically everyone else, including Livia, could hear him), “Lucky you – she’s hot.” Being the wise, equable Ravenclaw he was he had not punched Zacharias in the face – though now he was seriously considering asking Rose to do it for him – but Livia’s words (and Zacharias’ comment) had seemed to be the cue for everyone else in the world to consider him the martyred cherub. Zacharias was relegated to the role of ‘problem child’ (though he too managed to elicit his share of unwanted sympathy in the form of remarks like, “He’s overcompensating, it’s an act – just imagine the poor child’s tragedy”). Susan had slipped into the shadows like she always did, – in many ways she was more of a Slytherin than many he knew, though her house was Hufflepuff, – leaving the two boys to bear the brunt of the publicity.

He was going to grow a French moustache and enormous muscles. Maybe that would stop people from treating him like a baby, because he just didn't *do* martyred cherub.

Ron was walking up the staircase, trying to keep his head down and, in general, just escape attention, when he heard someone above shriek "Ron!" Before he had time to even look up, a pair of arms had been flung around his shoulders and a resounding kiss planted on his cheek.

"Hey," he greeted weakly, clinging to the balustrade to support himself. He looked up and saw Rose, her bag hanging lopsidedly off her arm, beaming down at him. In her usual fashion, her sleeves were rolled up, her tie knotted so loosely around her unbuttoned collar that it looked like one good tug would pull it off, and her socks sagging untidily about her ankles.

"Welcome back, mate," he heard Neville say warmly. The other boy stood on the step above Rose – his head just above hers because she was so much taller than him – looking as neat as Rose did untidy.

Rose was grinning broadly, blithely unaware that by standing in the middle of the staircase she was obstructing the flow of students anxious for dinner, but there was a wary, almost guilty look in her eyes.

"What have you two done?" he demanded, leaning against the railings. He couldn't help but smile – Rose and Neville's grins were infectious.

Neville chuckled and leaned forwards, whispering into Ron's ear, "Finished planting a Dungbomb in Dunghart's office, triggered to explode when he goes in to brush his hair before dinner. You should have been there – it was great, we used the pen-knife Sirius gave me last birthday, to open the door."

"And I stole one of his brushes," Rose said brightly. "I'm going to sell it to Pansy."

Ron couldn't help it. He laughed. "You could have stolen another brush – I'd have given it to Hermione. She's in love with Lockhart, no matter what we tell her about him."

"Then take it and give it to her," Rose said, fumbling with the clasp of her bag, "Pansy can do without the brush and I don't need the money in any case. Well, five hundred galleons now, eh Ron? You're a filthy billionaire compared to us."

"Rose-" Neville began sharply, clearly worried that with her usual lack of tact she'd touched a sensitive spot, scattered salt on some still-fresh wound.

Before Ron could say he didn't mind at all, he was perfectly fine, Rose turned around and said, with a fierceness she rarely used on Neville, "We're all friends, aren't we? I didn't hurt him with my 'mind-boggling deficit of prescience', Neville Harfang Longbottom. Fuck out of here, and stop bothering me." She grabbed Ron's arm roughly and said determinedly, "We're getting dinner. You're sitting with us, Ron." She said it with such firmness that he didn't dare dispute her and allowed her to frog-march him downstairs. Neville didn't join them for dinner.

While Rose loaded his plate with fried chicken and mashed potatoes, a sulky look on her face, he asked her, "What's wrong with Neville?"

Rose shrugged and shot an angry look at the Gryffindor table before setting his plate in front of him. Ron wondered who she'd been looking at. She attacked her food with an almost nauseating degree of violence, spearing peas brutally and ripping off pieces of chicken like a famine victim. *Mrs. Potter would have a field day yelling at her*, Ron thought. "I'm sorry," Rose suddenly muttered, halfway through the meal.

"Um, excuse me?" Ron said, not sure that he'd heard her properly. *Rose... apologizing?*

"I'm sorry," she said louder, putting down her knife and fork and staring gloomily at her plate. Decimated pieces of chicken and torn peas lay scattered on it, making it look uncannily like a battlefield.

“Er...”

“For Padma,” Rose said coldly, brushing her hair out of her eyes, not looking at him. “For Smith, too actually. For being a moronic prat in general.”

Suddenly, Ron began to pick up the pieces of the puzzle. Neville and Rose were angry at each other, Rose was apologizing... did it mean what he thought it did? “Did you two have a fight?” he asked quietly. *Did he ask you to apologize?*

The idea wasn't utterly implausible – Rose just might apologize if Neville came down hard enough on her. They were best friends, after all. They had an uncanny amount of influence over each other, a power that was sometimes almost frightening. It was the same way with Sirius and Rose, but there it wasn't frightening because Sirius was just so old and mature – well, he didn't act like it sometimes but he was, Ron knew. But with Neville and Rose... one could be a calculating, malicious bastard at times – and he wasn't nearly as grown-up as he thought he was – and the other was a violent, headstrong bitch. It really hurt to have to use such words to describe his two best friends but they actually *were* the most accurate.

*No wonder Padma's always curious about why we're friends.*

“No, we did not have a fight,” Rose said darkly. She shot another quick look at the Gryffindor table. Ron noticed she'd just glanced at the group of second-year girls clustered together.

“Well, then...?”

“Do you and Hermione Granger ever talk about girls?” she asked suddenly. “In sexual terms, I mean?”

“*What?*” Ron asked bewilderedly. “Why would I talk about that with *another* girl?”

“Well, do you?” Rose demanded.

“Of course, I don't! Do I *look* like a-”

“Yeah, you look totally feminine,” Rose conceded, checking him out. “Fiery red hair, sky-blue eyes, gorgeous complexion, lovely figure – you have the whole package.” She smirked.

“You know, I’m this close to hexing off your nose-”

Rose actually laughed. “Try it,” she murmured, eyes gleaming with emotions Ron could not place. “A duel – it’ll be fun.”

“You’re crazy,” he muttered, leaning back, away from her.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” she said, calmly. “So, if you don’t talk about girls like that with Hermione, do you do that with Michael?”

“Well, sometimes...”

“What’s your opinion on Lavender Brown?” she demanded ruthlessly.

“Lavender Brown?” Ron asked, trying to remember quickly. “Oh well, she’s nice. She showed us pictures of her bunny rabbit one day – it’s really cute.”

Rose rolled up her eyes and muttered a few swear-words under her breath.

“Your mum wouldn’t like you saying words like that,” Ron grinned.

“Is she hot?” Rose demanded. “I need to know.”

“Um... she’s sweet,” Ron said, shrugging. “Pretty, I guess... Parvati’s much better looking though.”

“Oh yes,” Rose said bitterly. “Padma’s identical twin.” He was surprised to hear a twinge of jealousy in her voice. “Tell me, Ron, what kind of girls does Neville like?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Ron wanted to know.

“I can’t go up and ask him a question like that!” Rose said, looking scandalized.



“Why not?” he asked, bewildered. “You can ask me what type I like, and I’ll tell you.”

“Yes, but it’d be so awkward!” Rose hissed. “And I know what kind of girls he likes in any case, I just need to confirm it!” She pouted before adding, “He prefers the dishy airhead type – god, he’s obsessed with his Savior-of-the-Wizarding-World role. He needs an accessory, damsel-in-distress princess-sort to complete the package, and that’s where that slut Brown comes in.” There was such venom in her voice that he felt like telling her to cool down and count to a hundred.

“He’s crushing on her? Well, she’s really nice,” Ron said.

“Of course, she’s *nice*,” Rose said harshly. “But she’s not nice for Neville, no way. She’s about as smart as Crabbe and Goyle, just better looking than them. And I can’t stand the way she giggles all the time – sounds like a bloody horse neighing itself to death because it’s been hacked in the stomach.” She looked at him for support, but he just shrugged noncommittally.

“Crushes don’t last long,” he said evenly.

“Good thing they don’t,” Rose said darkly. “If this lasts longer than two weeks, I’m going to take action.” She looked so furious that he was sure she would.

*October 27,*

*I’m sorry I haven’t written for so long. I haven’t been bored or depressed enough to.*

...

Sulking, much? You know, I could just put you down now and decide that I’m too old to write in diaries ever again. How would you feel if I did that, hmm?

**Forlorn. Despondent. Tormented. You cannot be cruel enough to deprive me of your brilliant companionship.**

*It's a pity isn't it, the way everyone says things like that to me all the time, only they're always joking. Nobody ever says things like that seriously.*

**Would it please you if they would?**

*Of course it would! I'd be flattered that I meant so much to someone, anyone.*

**Liar. You would hold them in contempt for that weakness. You like strong people, my dear, people, who have no need to rely or lean on others for anything. Like is drawn to like.**

*Opposites attract.*

**They attract so strongly that they collide. Repulsion follows collision. I detect a wistful note in your words, what's the matter?**

*Oh, nothing. Nothing at all, I'm just awfully tired that's all. It's 12:09.*

**On the subject of age-appropriate bedtimes...**

*For your information, I go to sleep at ten every other night. I can't fall asleep tonight, I mean, I'm tired but not sleepy. Have you ever felt like that? I want to fly, I want to run, I want to...*

**Throw benches?**

*If you're going to bring that up again, I'll-I'll just...*

**My humblest apologies, my lady. Pardon me, but it seems like the kind of thing you do to relieve your tension. There, I know you're debating whether to slam me into your trunk and never spare another glance at me.**

*Uncanny, how farsighted you are...*

**Yes, isn't it? You haven't opened me in, what's it been, nearly a fortnight. I crave information – how did your friend's trial go?**

*It wasn't his trial – he wasn't accused of anything...*

**I really must brush up on my legal vocabulary. But don't let my intrinsically brilliant remarks distract you.**

*As if. It went awesome – well, it had to, everyone was on our side and Uncle Padfoot told me that Dolores Umbridge bribed Rita Skeeter to brainwash the other people as badly as she could (she's awfully acidic when she wants to be). Ron, Ginny, Susan, and Smith got five hundred Galleons apiece as indemnity...*

**500 galleons? Not really?**

*Yes, I know it's huge – Ron swears he's going to buy himself a Nimbus 2001 as a Christmas present.*

**I simply cannot understand why those frivolous *children* are being awarded such...**

*Can't you? I can't understand why they aren't receiving even more.*

**To my mind, it is simply illogical. Blatant misappropriation of private fortunes – akin to thievery, I might say. But what happened to those accused?**

*They were publicly executed yesterday.*

**Who were they?**

*Um... there was a woman, I remember, Carrows and I think she had a brother. Leofric Rosier too, he used to be on the Board of Governors but was taken down two years ago, and his brother. That rich stockholder at Gringotts – Travers, Runcorn, Head of the Portkey Department, MacNair, official executioner of beasts at the Ministry, some Yaxley... oh, and Bartemius Crouch – I mean the Minister's son – was arrested, but he died two days after the trial.*

**Beg pardon?**

*Oh yes, everyone was simply horrified at that. Dead, the same way as Bellatrix Lestrange; of course, there was an official inquest and everything, post-mortem by St. Mungo's officials. They say he was poisoned... planned suicide, I guess. Everyone says it's old Mr.*

*Crouch's last gift to his son, sparing him the shame of being publicly executed, and I must say it does sound a lot like him to do such a thing...*

**So, that's why you've been too busy to drop by and chat with me. Keeping up with the gossip, aren't we?**

*Everyone is. You don't know how many conspiracy theories I've had shot at me – though right now everyone's particularly keen on the idea that young Crouch is actually an Animagus and is currently sunbathing in the Fiji islands as an exotically English canary (well, I guess canaries are exotic in the Fijis), instead of being good and dead. They had a public funeral for him though, and Uncle Padfoot told me he actually saw the body – Mrs. Crouch was perfectly distraught.*

**A sad loss for a mother - or should it be wife?**

*Both. His wife's going to have a baby.*

**Well, at least she is left with that posthumous token of his love. We must console ourselves with the smallest blessings in the darkest of times.**

*Do you have to make it sound perverted and stuff?*

**It's generally considered the proper condolence to pay to a lady in young Mrs. Crouch's situation. You are shockingly deficient in occasion-appropriate language, dear girl. What time is it?**

*What... oh, 12:17.*

**Is tomorrow a Saturday?**

*Actually it is. Why?*

**And you're not too sleepy?**

*I could run a mile right now.*

**Would you be interested in some elementary spellwork, so late at night?**

*Depends... what do you have in mind?*

**You have been taught to cast *Diffindo* in class, I presume. Well, then why don't you perform it for me, right now. Using your left hand. You may now begin.**

...

*Done.*

**Four minutes, twenty-seven seconds. This slovenly pace will simply not do.**

*It's not my fault! I can do it just fine, right-handed, but when I try left-handed it's just like there's some force that's blocking me. You know like when you try to push two magnets with the same poles at each other? It feels like that, and my wrist actually hurts. Why's that?*

**It's your own lack of willpower that's responsible for that. Tell me, my dear, what has become of the spirited girl who vowed to become the equal of Rowena Ravenclaw in dueling?**

*I never said that! Sure, I was interested in learning how to use two wands then, but that was ages ago, near about a month. I felt pretty low all through last month, but that's all changed, and I don't understand why I even have to learn about that stupid stuff. It's boring, and anyway, I'm going to be an international Quidditch player, not some dumb Ravenclaw geek. Ugh.*

**You sound so petulant. Are you sure you're quite alright?**

*First, I'm wistful. Now, I'm petulant. Make up your mind, you great, big lump of parchment!*

**Do you want to listen to a story?**

*A what-?*

**It's a story that concerns you and your family, one that I doubt you've ever been told before. Do you know much about your grandmother Dorea?**

*Of course, I do. I mean she's my grandmother, after all.*

**I won't question that. Can you tell me – just to sate my curiosity, mind you – who *her* parents were?**

*Easy. Cygnus Black and Violetta Bulstrode.*

**Wrong. Pollux Black and his sister, Cassiopeia.**

*Excuse me?*

**Have you ever taken a look at Nature's Nobility? Or for that matter, at the Black family tapestry? Have you ever noted the age difference between your venerable grandmother and her dear siblings? Marius Black – he was a Squib – was fourteen years older than her, Cassiopeia twenty-two and Pollux twenty-three. Her cousin, Lycoris, was twenty-five years older.**

*So? Are you hinting at, um, what's it called...*

**Incest? I'm not just hinting, I'm stating a plain, well-known fact. Pollux Black was interlocked in a blazing romance that seared the halls of Hogwarts, painting the House of Black even blacker with scandal, with his fair sister. They were wild about each other – he only married Irma Crabbe to keep his reputation – and then they had a child... Of course, they wanted to keep it under wraps, pass off the girl as Violetta's late-born daughter, but rumors have an odd way of trickling out... Of course, at the time, everyone assumed it was Lycoris though, not Cassiopeia. He had had an affair with Lycoris as well, when they were quite young – he was twelve I believe, and she fourteen at the time...**

*What the fuck? What the fucking fuck?*

**Your grandmother Dorea was a product of incest between siblings. She was in her seventh year when my former owner was in his second – a pretty, vivacious thing, I believe, best**

**friends with the Rosier beauty. She lost her mind when she was eighteen, you know.**

*No, I don't. I don't want to know.*

**Oh yes, you do. One sultry summer afternoon, when only her half-siblings, Alphard and Walburga, were at home, she finally went crazy. She took a kitchen knife and slashed into eleven-year-old Walburga's face, blinding her in one eye, and cut off Alphard's ear before anyone could interfere. She was confined to St. Mungo's for three or four years – mad as a hatter – before being deemed fit to be released. Then, she severed off all ties with the Blacks, joined the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, and years later, married Charlus Potter – the decrepit, impoverished ex-Professor of Ancient Runes, older than her own father – before spawning your father. So there.**

*Oh my god. You're lying.*

**Really? Write to your father and ask him whether it's true or not.**

*No, no it can't be...*

**Why ever not?**

*Because... well, because someone would have mentioned it to me if my grandmother went crazy! They wouldn't have kept it from me!*

**Wouldn't they have? How would this information have helped you? Isn't it best left to the past? I'm sure you don't need a lecture on the inherent dangers of cross-breeding between siblings...**

*It's just gross! My grandmother was a lovely woman! Everyone says so – even Uncle Padfoot! She treated him like her own son!*

**You know something? Your godfather's mother was your grandmother's half-sister. Puts you on the level of, I believe first cousins or something akin... quite enough to destroy the remnants of your little crush on him, hmm?**

Rose slammed the diary shut and threw it, with all the force she could muster, at the opposite wall. It struck the stone with a muffled thud before slipping down and falling on Tracey's heart-shaped rug, festooned with white-and-pink posies. She stared at it for a moment, biting her quivering lips, her nails digging into her palms and gouging out crescent-shaped, bloody welts. Then, suddenly, she threw off the covers and stood up. In the darkness relieved only by a few slender, wax tapers that cast softly sinister pools of green light, she fumbled for her robe and wand – she never felt properly dressed without having it nearby – before striding out of the dormitory. She slipped past the Common Room, ignoring the curious stares of the few, N.E.W.T-level students still up doing their homework or groping each other on the couches.

It was a cold night, even colder out in the dimly-lit dungeons under the lake, and she shivered as she walked up the stone staircases, her pace firm, brisk, purposeful. It was only when she reached the Grand Staircase, facing the vast, cavernous Great Hall that looked even more imposing in the semi-darkness, she realized that she had no idea what she was doing. She stood for a moment in the space between the high, winding staircase and the mighty hall, an oddly forlorn, little figure in her red pajamas and peach-colored robe. She looked like a lost, little girl, her eyes wide, adjusting to the darkness, chewing a strand of her hair like a child.

Hesitatingly, almost timidly, she quietly passed the staircase and walked towards the great doors. Lightly, she pressed on one and surprisingly it croaked before cracking open just wide enough for her to pass through. Grimacing in distaste now, – *so much for high-tech security measures, the defense system here could definitely be better, how about adding a dragon or two for protection?* – she slipped out. Quickly, she cast a Warming Spell on herself before the chill of the autumn night could penetrate into her bones.

Comfortable, she leaned against the thick stonewall, wondering about what she wanted to do. She hadn't been there for more than a few seconds when she caught a gleam of silver on the horizon. Curious yet apprehensive, she craned her neck forwards, one hand ready on the door to dash inside, should she sight danger, like a wary animal. The speck of silver slowly materialized into a head, the head into



neck and shoulders, arms, torso, and legs. A little girl with long, silvery-blond hair – a burlap sack in her arms – appeared. Clad in a flowing, powder-blue gown, dotted with whirling, golden stars, her feet bare, numerous silver rings and bangles glinting on her ears and wrists, respectively, she gave the distinct impression of being a sprite or young dryad of some sort.

Rose who had been about to call out to her stopped short, eying her warily. As the little girl drew nearer, Rose saw her face more clearly – the dreamy, abstracted expression, eyes misted over, her gaze somewhere far off into the distance – the potent aura of almost palpable dottiness that the girl practically reeked of was impossible not to distinguish. This was no nymph of the forest – this was...

Well, Rose didn't know who she was – and suddenly she felt like she didn't *want* to know – but there was just something wrong about this girl. Uncertain of whether to flee or hold her ground, her predicament was answered when the girl herself murmured vaguely, "Oh hello. It's a lovely night to be out picking maelstrom grass, isn't it? So cool, and with the fireflies singing so nicely... perfect conditions."

Rose quickly assessed the girl – four inches shorter than her and quite thin – before deciding that she couldn't possibly be any physical threat and she looked too young to be of much use in a duel. "Maelstrom grass?" she demanded, putting her hand on her hip and eying the girl with the regal disdain of an amused, but still scornful, lioness – though she still kept a finger on her wand, just in case. "What's that?"

"It's called Apollo's Spear too," the girl said helpfully, putting down the burlap sack on the marble steps, at Rose's feet. She knelt down next to it, and untied the knot of rope at its mouth adding, "Though I think maelstrom grass is the more popular name. I've been collecting it for over two hours now – I think I have enough now to last me until next month." She slipped a slender, white arm into the sack and brought out a fistful of very-pointed looking grass that gleamed oddly silver-green (or perhaps it was a trick of the moonlight) and a few small, delicate, red-and-purple flowers.

Despite herself, curious, Rose leaned forwards and almost as soon, jumped back, gagging. She fanned the air around her nose violently, coughing. The girl looked up at her, a concerned expression on her pale face. As soon as she could speak, Rose choked out, "Those are noxious! Were you trying to poison my *nose*?"

The girl sniffed the grass and the flowers curiously, her nose wrinkling slightly. "Oh yes," she added thoughtfully, "It's a side-effect, but it lasts only at night. While daylight lasts they smell truly heavenly." And she smiled, as though to emphasize her point.

*Freaking Mona Lisa*, Rose thought, slightly spooked by the smile. "What are they for?" she asked irritably, rubbing her raw nose.

"They store the magic of good dreams," the girl said, in deadly earnest. "And ward off nightmares. Besides, they look very nice in the morning, Daddy loves having them about the house."

"They ward off nightmares, eh?" Rose chuckled in spite of herself. "My father could sure do with some of those."

"You could post some of these to him," the girl suggested, looking serious. "All you need to do is apply a Freshening Charm on them every day – they last for three months without losing their power."

The girl looked and spoke so assuredly that Rose believed her. There had always been an odd quality of gullibility, distinctly at odds with the rest of Rose's fierce, vibrant personality, about her that puzzled many people because it was a character trait they simply couldn't associate with her, of all people. She was human, and therefore a bundle of contradictions. In fact, she was made up of fewer contradictions than most people, but hers stood out more sharply, so distinctly were they at odds with the rest of her nature, white against black almost, to other people's shades of multi-faceted grey.

Open-hearted generosity in things that didn't matter, compared to brute, animal selfishness in things that did. Surprising nobility and complete selflessness when it was actually called upon, compared to her sometimes-uncontrollable rage, which was almost madness. The cold, hard, brutal application of logic while concocting a short-term plan, compared to the overabundance of personal prejudices,

emotion, and lack of reason while creating a long-term one. Hypocrisy in her private views, but sincerity in all her endeavors.

“Can you give me some?” she asked eagerly, thinking about her father. “I don’t have much money right now, but I’ll pay later – what’s your name?”

“Luna Lovegood,” the girl said, a small frown on her face. “But you don’t need to pay me – it’s a gift.”

“Oh... oh,” Rose said, feeling awkward. “But I hardly know you – I mean, I can’t take a gift like that from you. You must have worked really hard to collect all of that...”

“I have much more,” Luna said sweetly, “and I think you need it more than I do right now.” She smiled and put a fistful of grass and flowers – Rose made sure to keep her nose as far as possible from them, though the toxic odor still drifted up, faintly, to her sensitive nostrils – in her hand. “Between friends.”

“Oh, er, thanks,” Rose muttered, feeling horribly wrong-footed. “I’m, um, Rose Potter and it’s been, well, nice meeting you.”

Luna began to tie up her sack, smiling a little. “A pleasure,” she murmured, standing up. She began to pick up the sack, but it looked so heavy and so big for her small, slight frame that Rose automatically, her ingrained sense of chivalry rising in protest, took it from her. “Come on,” she grinned, when Luna raised her eyebrows slightly, “I’ll walk you back – what house are you in?”

“Ravenclaw,” came the answer, and Rose immediately regretted her damned gallantry. *Well, at least I’ll burn off half a billion calories this way*, she thought balefully, faced with the prospect of walking up and down ten flights of staircases.

**000**

*Dearest, Darlingest Daddy-est,*

*Happy Halloween!*

*Do you remember what happened last year? I saved Nev from a troll and Draco almost got his head bashed in by the troll too. Oh, and I screamed at both of them for hours and Neville got a Howler the next day and you two were really, awfully put out. Ah well, happy times don't last forever, do they? Now we have a complete, out-and-out MORON for a DADA teacher instead of a Death Eater and I really can't decide which is worse. Is it true that there's a jinx on the DADA position here at Hogwarts, and that You-Know-Who put it? I mean, no DADA teacher has lasted for over a year here, for, um, twenty years right? Do you think we'll manage to get rid of Lockhart this year?*

*Well, if we don't it won't be for any lack of trying. Did I ever tell you what the sixth-year Slyths did? Well, Lockhart chose Flint to play the part of the damsel-in-distress one class – all the other girls gave him the evil eye and told him they had cramps and if he made them act, they'd set Pomfrey on him and Pomfrey has a BIG thing for Lockhart so he's kind of scared of her. You can just guess how Flint felt cause they were enacting the Legend of Sleeping Beauty – I have no idea why, though, Lockhart's just pretty stoned most of the time – and Lockhart snogged his face out at the end (he has a troll fetish, I guess). Well, he sort of formed an unofficial Anti-Lockhart Club – it currently has seventy-three members – and they've:*

*Ripped off all the posters in his office thrice (but he still keeps replacing them and chuckling 'children will be children' in class)*

*Sent a Niffler loose in his bedroom (well, at least none of us have to polish his trophies and medals for detention anymore)*

*Managed to break his knee-cap once*

*Replaced his shampoo with Hair Removal Solution so that he went around bald for two days before he got a good wig*

*Mailed him undiluted Bubotuber puss (he had to be confined to the Hospital Wing for a day because of that – Pomfrey had a field day)*

*Planted a Dungbomb in his office (me and Neville did it because he made us enact Rapunzel one day, where I was the evil witch, he was Rapunzel, and Neville was the prince and, er, he snogged Nev's face out too)*

*And he's still around. I guess the members of the club will go crazy one fine day and just A-K him. Joking, just joking. But seriously, what do you have to get rid of a narcissist, troll-fetishy, gay, permanently-stoned asshole? Sorry, I just had to use that word – I mean there's no other word for him. If you were here, you'd understand. Do you have any suggestions for any other methods to eliminate him? I suggested the shampoo one – he loves his hair just as much as Ginny and Uncle Padfoot do theirs, he actually has a NICKNAME for his HAIR (it's 'Adelaide, my sweet love') – but I can't think of anything else now. How's work, by the way? Heard anything else about the Crouch case? It's really fishy, if you ask me.*

XOXOXO

*Rosalie*

*PS: I'm sending you a packet of maelstrom grass – or you can call it Apollo's Spear too. It wards off nightmares, but the flowers stink at night. I think you'll like it.*

000

Neville enjoyed Herbology. In second year, Rose was beginning to despise it wholeheartedly.

It was bad enough that they were working with *Mandrakes* – aka fanged, bloodthirsty mud-infants armed with the screams of death. It was worse that they were working with the current crop of Gryffindors. It was a tragedy, nothing less, that they had to be paired up with aforementioned Gryffindors every single class. Sprout was just waiting for them to all be killed off in class – Smith had come precariously close in one class, thanks to Rose – so that she could use their decomposing corpses as manure for her beloved plants. Basically, Hogwarts was something of a minor deathtrap for all those who ventured into its premises.

“Draco Malfoy – Hermione Granger!” Sprout called out from her list of names.

“I don’t believe this,” Rose heard him mutter to Blaise who offered him a sympathetic grin. “If my father hears of this... on the Board of Governors...”

*As you’ve just told us for the eleven-hundredth time, Rose thought wearily. Name dropping is all very well and good, but surely there’s a limit?*

“Blaise Zabini – Parvati Patil!”

Parvati shot a quick glare across the room at Blaise, whose grin had now faded into a sulky half-scowl, before hissing something violently into Lavender’s ear. “Her mother and mine are best friends,” Blaise said gloomily, in answer to Rose’s questioning glance. “That’s enough reason for both of us to be enemies for life, isn’t it?”

“Neville Longbottom – Lavender Brown!”

Neville who had been fiddling with his Herbology book, looking a little bored, promptly dropped it. A radiant, euphoric smile – almost maniac in its beatific-ness – replaced the bored expression. His eyes began to shine with the light of true, soulmate-esque love and he began to lick his lips like a hungry puppy that had just smelt fresh meat. Lavender seemed to find his expression unnerving – and Rose really couldn’t blame her now. Neville in love was... scary.

“Daphne Greengrass – Seamus Finnegan! Pansy Parkinson – Dean Thomas!”

The two girls groaned simultaneously. “Mudblood!” Pansy moaned. “If he makes a single move,” Daphne gritted out, “I will smash his clavicles into tiny little bits with my shovel.”

Rose chose not to remind her that it was impossible to break anyone’s bones – even slender, ridiculously effeminate-looking Finnegan’s – using a school shovel. Heck, the shovels could barely break through the surface of mud. They were almost completely ineffective for any purpose.

“Rose Potter – Zacharias Smith!”

“Enjoy yourself,” Pansy trilled out, her smile almost as malicious as Blaise’s. “You can always throw a-”

“Maybe I will,” Rose said silkily, “Throw a bench at you, I mean. It’s not like I’m exactly worried about the consequences. I do as I please, when I please, you know.” The guarded look on Pansy’s face as she tossed her hair over her shoulder and swore in German was certainly gratifying, but a doubt lingered at the back of Rose’s mind. *Do they really think I’d do that again? God, I’d probably be expelled!*

“Please partner up now, I want those Mandrakes repotted by the end of class. Put your earmuffs on now, when you see the red sparks, you may begin.”

Neville quickly snatched up his book which had fallen on the ground and practically floated across the greenhouse towards wary-eyed Lavender. “Blimey, he’s fallen really hard for her, hasn’t he?” Blaise muttered into Rose’s ear, while Parvati, scowling, beckoned him over. Unwillingly, Rose scooped up her things and headed towards the table where the Mandrakes that needed to be repotted were positioned. She put on her soft, forest green earmuffs and leaned her elbows on the table and watched Smith, who looked more than a little hung-over (though she was pretty sure it was just sleep deprivation) trudge towards her.

He nodded with a degree of politeness which he’d never shown her, and put his earmuffs on. She had no idea why, but it always seemed like he managed to get the fluffy pink ones which everyone else in the class avoided like a bad case of Dragonpox. It almost certainly had to be personal choice – so, did that mean he was gay? She smirked and tried to think of wearing a fuchsia-pink T-shirt, holding hands with other guys... yeah the image fit him.

She saw the red sparks and hand-signaled him to begin the first part of the operation. She’d record it, then complete the second part which he would have to record. Shrugging, he slipped on his dragon-hide gloves and bent over the pot. Ostentatiously, for Sprout’s sake, Rose opened her copy and inked her quill, but she was actually looking across the room at Neville and Lavender. They weren’t talking – *well of course they aren’t, you dolt* – and Neville was repotting while

Lavender was writing. Nothing suspicious, no nothing at all, of course there was nothing to be suspicious about... Neville liked repotting but Lavender hated writing because she was a stupid airhead, an out-and-out bimbo so perhaps she was doing this because she was deeply, passionately, madly in love with Neville, and wanted to show how much she loved him by doing the writing?

Well? It was *possible* wasn't it?

There was this nervous little grin on Neville's face, a really sweet and cute one actually – though it did make him look like a doofus but maybe Lavender found doofusses attractive? – and Lavender was almost but not quite smiling. Clearly she was trying to suppress her feelings for Neville, by not smiling, but because she wanted to give him some encouragement there was just a little bit of a hint of a smile on her face.

Manipulative bitch. She'd use him for her own sordid purposes then dump him and break his heart and then where would poor, innocent Neville be? Stranded in the land of heartbreak!

Rose's sympathy for him rose and rose until it was almost as high as the castle of Hogwarts and she had already imagined Lavender – looking like a blond ice queen, never mind that she wasn't blond and that even Padma was more of an ice queen than her – throwing Neville's pink-diamond-and-platinum engagement ring at his face so hard that he had a brain concussion and was confined to St. Mungo's for a fortnight for treatment. And Rose could practically feel her own heart breaking as she listened to Neville's maniac ravings about the lost love of his life, and being able to do nothing about it. Then a day would come when Neville would finally go mad and throw himself off a cliff somewhere into the sea – and of course his body would never be found – while she, Rose, would of course dutifully commit suicide because she couldn't imagine life without Neville. It was a heart-rending tragedy and tears prickled at the corners of her eyelids as she stared across the room at the two, completely ignoring the fact that she actually had work to do.

A violent shove in the shoulder from Smith did little to remedy matters. She turned towards him, a single tear streaming down her cheek, raw



agony on her face. Quite naturally, this was enough for him to drop his shovel and mouth, "What the hell's wrong with you? Get back to work!"

"Lavender killed Neville," she mouthed back. "She killed him with her own two hands and now he's dead and I'll have to die as well!"

Smith glanced across the room quickly, as though expecting to see a decapitated Neville and Lavender laughing and brandishing a bloody axe. "He's still very much alive," he mouthed sourly, when he realized that that was not the case, adding, "Unfortunately, so are you."

Rose rubbed her eye and was surprised to feel the salty tear stinging her cheek. "She owns his soul now, so he's as good as dead," she mouthed.

Smith's eyebrows shot up so high that Rose was certainly afraid that they'd never come down. Eyebrow-less Smith... yucky. "Maybe I should do the recording, while you can do the repotting. I'll even spy on them for you if you like."

"No!" she mouthed vehemently, practically hanging over him in her rage that he'd even suggested he'd spy. She was the only person allowed to spy on her best friend! "You won't notice the changes in his face as well as I will! You won't understand their code language, their body postures! You're not qualified to judge true love!"

He threw up his hands defensively. "You don't have to climb all over me, you know."

For a moment, she felt like throwing the pot, with the wriggling, howling Mandrakes, at his face. She could feel her blood rising, her face warming and for a moment, she was ready to take action. And then suddenly, she felt cold, like she'd just been thrown into a bucket of ice. Goosebumps rose over her arms and she could feel her knees quivering. Shivering, she had to lean back against the table to steady herself, trying to take deep breathes to calm herself. She felt like throwing up, as though someone had just punched her – hard – through the stomach.

"Potter? Potter?" Smith was looming over her and she tried to give him a smile, tried to signal that she was fine, just a bit dizzy that's all. She straightened and pulled her back away from the table.

"I'm-" she began, but just as soon as she'd pulled away from her support, her vision blurred at the edges, and then suddenly everything went blank. She fainted.

**A/N: Sorry for the long break! Hope this big update makes up for it.**

**Cheshire: Neville isn't dark actually (well I didn't intend for him to be, but the characters do seem to have a life of their own), he's just full of himself and bratty. Yeah, that's Rose. And she can be - when she feels like it - nice. Most of the time she doesn't feel like being nice... lol, I like crazy characters. Ginny? I tried to make her canonish - well, OoTP and HBP canon-wise - athletic, pretty, jokey.**

**MM: I love canon-brat-but-can-sometimes-be-smart!Draco. It's a pity he's so Leather-Pansty in fanon. I heart canon!Ron, and I think he's smarter than it's let on in the books. Chess Genius anyone?**

**anon: No, Debacle isn't Bellatrix. Interesting guess though XD Have you read my 'Foxglove'? I think the writing is even better there.**

**TheLadyAthena: In the HP world, it seems the prettier you are, the better your chances of world domination. Tom Riddle, Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, Gellert Grindelwynd, Gilderoy Lockhart (well he was too dumb for WD, so I guess not)...**

## ***Siriusly Yours***

"Last night I had a revelation  
Somehow I have to make you pay  
It's all about manipulation  
And what it takes to get my way  
I don't believe in soft solutions  
No one makes a fool of me  
Without receiving retribution  
No one hurts me and goes free."

## **-- Red Delicious, "Bring You Down."**

Rose sneezed and woke up with a start, the noxious fumes of a burning vine of Devil's Snare clogging her nostrils. "Blimey, that was fast," she heard someone say, sounding a little awed. Soft fingers brushed away the tendrils of hair that clung to her sweat-streaked forehead, and then a low voice, close to her ear, said very gently, "Rose, it's me. Neville." "You fainted," Smith said promptly – and inanely.

"I know," she managed to croak out. "I'd know your voice anywhere."

"Open your eyes now," a brisk voice said, as the scent of the fumes began to fade. "Come on, hurry up – there's nothing much the matter with you."

"What do you mean there's nothing wrong with her?" she heard Neville say hotly. "She fainted!"

"Yes, well, plenty of people manage to do that and they survive just fine, don't they?" she could practically see Madam Pomfrey glaring down at Neville, even though she hadn't opened her eyes yet.

"Not always," a lazy voice interceded. "Sometimes they slip into comas and wither away, dead while they're still alive." There was just the ghastliest hint of a grin in that voice. "My mother, you know, – she was still alive after well, you know, what happened to her. In the end, they had to get a special warrant from the Ministry for a mercy killing."

At this, Rose quickly opened her eyes. She saw Smith leaning against the wall by her headboard, a wolfish smile on his face as he looked at irate Pomfrey. Neville was sitting on the bed, a loose strand of her hair in his fingers. "What's wrong with your eyes?" Neville demanded suddenly, peering forwards. "They're all red and stuff..."

"Probably a case of overexertion," Pomfrey tsked, still frowning at Smith. Expertly, she took Rose's wrist and ran her fingers over her arm. "Are you sure you're not coming down with a case of fever? Your hand's quite warm."

"I'm fine," she muttered, trying to sit up straight. Her shoulders trembled as she leant against the headboard, and her head buzzed like a beehive. "What happened?"

"Professor Sprout carried you up here on a stretcher and I followed, and he followed because he wanted to cut class," Neville said.

"Well, you'd have done the same," Smith added resentfully. "If I didn't leave, Sprout would have made me partner up with Goyle – seriously, he's even worse than Potter. Though my official reason, of course, is that I'm overcome with guilt that I couldn't help my partner and the only thing that can help relieve my trauma is my partner forgiving me for my careless lack of vigilance."

"Children these days," Pomfrey grumbled. "Well, I must say that you could do with a touch of Invigorating Draught – have you been skipping breakfast or that sort of thing? You're looking awfully peaky."

Neville chuckled at the thought of Rose missing breakfast, while she shook her head. "No?" Pomfrey muttered, bustling around for a bottle of Invigorating Draught. "Well, how strange then..." Rose quietly sipped the spoonful of oddly sweet, thickly gelatinous, cherry-colored medicine.

"Mind now that you keep proper bedtimes and have your meals right," Pomfrey said, frowning and waving the spoon threateningly at Rose. "I've no wish to see you here sooner than I must."

"Don't worry, you won't see me," Rose promised, climbing out of the bed. Her head still ached but she felt a little better now, strong

enough to walk at least. "But I'll just send you a few of my victims, for old times' sake, to keep you company here."

**000**

*November 9,*

*I fainted in Herbology class. Fainting isn't nearly as nice as it's made out to be in stories. And Smith's an awful idiot – he didn't catch me and now my whole back is bruised up. I'm going to have to sleep on my stomach tonight, and I know I'm not going to get any rest that way.*

**Why don't you apply some Bruise Balm?**

*Won't do much good. I've had it applied on me so many times in the past that I've practically developed immunity against it. Still, I'll ask Tracey to put some on me – she'll do that, she's very nice.*

**That redhead in your dormitory, eh? Tracey Davies?**

*Strawberry blonde, actually. Have I ever mentioned her to you? Oh, and by the way, aren't you going to ask me why I'm talking to you after you told me all those awful lies?*

**The plain truth is always termed as 'awful lies'. You are fascinated by me. You hope to uncover more family secrets, more skeletons in the cupboard, by 'talking' to me. You are plagued by the mysteries you have never been told of, the things that you cannot discuss with anyone... admit whether this is not so.**

*Of course, it is. You know me inside out, don't you?*

**To tell you the truth, it isn't hard to know you inside out.**

*Really?*

**You're a nice, little thing, and nice, little things are seldom enigmas.**

*Rose Potter equals to nice, little thing? Oh hell, everyone in my year's going to have a field day if they hear that. Do I act like a nice, little thing?*

**Have you ever betrayed any of your friends?**

*No, of course not!*

**Then you qualify as a nice, little thing. Let's not quarrel over trivial issues. I know a great many things about you, things that perhaps even you don't know about yourself...**

*Like what?*

**Do you still remember everything you saw in the Mirror of Erised?**

*Are you going to bring all that junk up again...*

**Of course, I am. You saw yourself killing your best friend, Neville Longbottom. Do you know why?**

*No. Why?*

**You are an insanely possessive person. Domineering to the point of being dictatorial, jealous of the slightest encroachments on what you perceive to be your territory... I don't know about now, but then you wanted to keep him to yourself forever, seal him to you. And what better way then by sending him to his death, where he would never be anyone else's?**

*I'm going to be calm, right now. Do you have any idea how warped that sounded?*

**The human psyche is indeed warped.**

*Haha, very funny. I never felt like that about Neville. I mean, I'm not madly jealous...*

**Prove it.**

*Uncle Padfoot has a million girlfriends – do I plot to murder them?*

**You assume, with your typical brand of naïveté, that he shares no emotional connection with any of them – that it is purely a bond of carnal lust. That is enough to satisfy you – you think, *let him enjoy himself so long as it is me who he truly loves. I'll be waiting for him, when he's ready.***

*You know what? That was surprisingly spot on. But about Neville – not so much.*

**What other reasons can you give for wishing to kill him?**

*Um... maybe I was subconsciously furious at him? Or maybe he represents a part of my life that I want to, er, cancel out or something?*

**I shall bring up your past words.**

*I saw myself killing someone, someone I know very well. The funny thing is, I have no idea why I would want to kill that person. Sometimes I do tell him - "I going to kill you!" - but that's only in fun, never seriously. I'm an almost-murderess. Eck. How is that supposed to improve my mood?*

*If that isn't bad enough, I saw myself holding my wand over a bloody corpse. Guess whose corpse that was?*

**Neville Longbottom.**

*Who wants to kill their best friend? Desires it, in fact? That was last year too, when we were even closer than now, when we had a friendship without secrets or rifts or ugly twists.*

**And by your own account, I can assume that you have led what can only be termed as a privileged life. Loving parents, siblings, friends, no privations... there are many who are not as fortunate as you. It's that that puzzles me about you – why do you get so angry sometimes?**

*God, don't ask me. You know everything about me, don't you? Why don't you tell me.*

**If I knew just that little bit about you, I would have complete control over you. Your thoughts, your powers, your freedom of will... they would all be at my control.**

*You sound like a megalomaniac. Delusions of grandeur and everything.*

**I think like one. Go get the Davies girl to apply some balm on your back – you need a good night's rest. By the way, how are you feeling right now?**

*A bit tired. Weak actually.*

**What a pity. Good night, now.**

**000**

"I'm thinking about setting up a Dueling Club," Uncle Moony said conversationally. Rose was sitting in his office, sipping tea – practically redolent with sugar and cream, just the way he liked it – and watching him tenderly water his *Mimulus mimbletonia*. It was an extremely rare plant – classified as Type II Threatened Species by the International Warlocks' Confederation, in the Environmental Summit of 1987 – and Uncle Moony had spent the last fifteen minutes telling her about how he'd managed to collect it while studying Four-Horned Clompsbitters in Assyria.

Rose looked up and raised both eyebrows skeptically. "You can't let anyone in this school duel," she said seriously, smacking her lips in appreciation of the tea. "They'll finish up killing each other and you'll be left with all the blame."

"Better me setting up the club than Lockhart, eh?" he said wryly. "Gilderoy was just talking about it and Septima – I mean Professor Vector – quite agreed with me that it'd be much better if we collaborated together to set up the club, under Dumbledore's approval. You know, Severus was considering talking to Gilderoy about it... the pair of them together, training innocent students the intricacies of dueling..."



“Dynamite, all charged up to explode,” Rose nodded seriously. “Does Snape want the DADA position so badly that he’s willing to kill Lockhart for it? Well, best of luck to him. I can’t wait for Lockhart to...”

“Yes, I understand your sentiments perfectly,” Uncle Moony said dryly. “He was advising me just the other day that grey and black didn’t do much for my complexion and that I’d be better advised to switch to the enthralling hues of magenta and deep lilac... charming man.”

Rose snorted. “Blaise loves him – I swear, they get together after class to discuss the advantages of shamrock green over lime and whether a chignon is an appropriate hairstyle for semi-formal daywear. When are you going to set up the club?”

“Septima and I have put up our proposal to Dumbledore – we’re still waiting for him to consider it. He’s very busy nowadays – working over all those new changes tabled by the Ministry for the curriculum here.”

“So it *is* changing?” Rose asked. “And Muggle Studies is going to be made compulsory while Astronomy is optional? Damn, I like Professor Sinistra – she’s pretty cool. And I’m half-Muggle, why do I need Muggle Studies? What will they teach us?”

“Aside from the basics like how to pass off unrecognized in a Muggle crowd and using the subway you’ll probably be tackling more complex matters like techomancy and wandless defense, Charity’s told me. The term Muggle Studies will prove to be rather a misnomer.” Uncle Moony patted his *Mimulus mimbletonia* fondly, like a doting father, and took a seat across the table from Rose.

She handed him his cup of tea asking, “They’re going to put us through Maths too, right? But, *why*? I mean, it’s pretty useless in the wizarding world, isn’t it?”

Uncle Moony shrugged. “They have Mathematics until Fourth Year at Beauxbatons, compulsory. After that it’s optional,” he said, “it hasn’t proved to be too much of a hassle – though here, they’re arranging it for all the students. I really have no idea why, though.”

“Who tabled the proposal?” Rose demanded. “Someone who likes Maths?”

“I’ve heard Miss Ramsey was the one who first suggested it – she has Madam Umbridge’s political clout at her back, of course. She’s an ex-student from Beauxbatons, so I can only assume that she was inspired enough by the subject to...”

“Torment the innocent students of Hogwarts with it for all of eternity,” Rose said, pouting. “Yeah, I get it. Grown-ups are all idiots.” She laughed, adding, “Except for you, of course.”

“The afterthought is much appreciated,” Uncle Moony said calmly. “By the by, Rose, have you decided what subjects you’ll be taking up for third year? It’s a very important decision that will affect the rest of your academic career...”

“Care of Magical Creatures, of course,” Rose said promptly. “Mum and I were talking about it a little over the summer, and I guess I want to take up Arithmancy too. Runes sounds boring, Divination is an awfully woolly subject, and I *have* to take up Muggle Studies. Besides, I’m not that fond of Astronomy even if Sinistra’s nice.” She looked at the clock on the wall and stood up. “I’d better get going. The match starts in half-an-hour – I’m just going to pick up Neville from wherever he is and go. By the way, Uncle Moony, who are supporting today? Slytherin or Gryffindor?” She grinned wolfishly.

“Teachers aren’t supposed to take sides, you know,” he said diplomatically.

She raised her eyebrows and flashed him a smile. “That’s alright,” she said, “but when I’m playing again, you’ve got to support Slytherin.”

**000**

For the first time that year, Rose was watching a school Quidditch match from the spectators’ stands. The first match had been between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff and, out of principle, she’d refused to go. She knew she’d feel bitter and angry and resentful that she wasn’t allowed to play, while perfect nincompoops like Roger Davies and

Francisca Langley were allowed to score for their respective teams. But now, at a Slytherin-Gryffindor match, she couldn't resist the temptation. The crowds were packed to capacity – Slytherin and Gryffindor both had new Seekers, both second-years, and both looked remarkably alike from a distance.

In actuality, it really was odd how Draco and Smith were so similar. Both of them blond, self-obsessed, vain, obnoxious-on-principle berks who, in Rose's opinion, badly needed to get a life. Smith was just taller and Draco had prettier hair.

She tugged restlessly on her green-and-silver scarf, emblazoned with a slithering serpent, and watched Flint's girlfriend, her long hair dyed bright green, cheer. If she hadn't been afraid that Uncle Moony would write to her mother, she would probably also have dyed her hair green. It might actually have looked good with her eyes and it certainly *would* grab attention. Attention was always lovely, though winning was more important.

"Don't look so worried," Neville said consolingly, patting her shoulder. "We have a fleet of Nimbus 2001s – what could possibly go wrong?"

Rose focused her binoculars on Smith and then on Draco. "They both look peaky," she said. "For Draco, that's bad – whenever he looks peaky he doesn't perform better, like Montague does. His performance turns out to be even worse than before – he's bad at handling strain. I don't know about Smith."

"We'd better keep our fingers crossed that he's as good at handling stress as Draco is a Mandrake," Neville joked nervously.

Rose actually crossed her fingers and began tapping them on the wooden railing of the Slytherin box against which she was almost pushed by the jostling crowd. Touching wood brought good luck, Uncle Padfoot had told her. She didn't know why, but instinctively, she believed him, like she almost always did. His words always seemed to ring with a gospel-esque truth to her.

"And, they're off! Bell takes the Quaffle, passes to Spinnet and, oh no, Warrington employs a Horsetail Maneuver to knock it out of her hands..."

Lee Jordan, former Seeker of the Gryffindor Team, was commentating. “You’d think it’d be colder, now that it’s the eighteenth of November...” someone was saying to her partner and Rose wished that she could slap that person. It was just positively *rude* to make non-Quidditch-related comments at a Quidditch match. Unless, of course, the players were playing so badly that it was your duty to turn around and start talking to your neighbor as loudly as you could and try to ignore the match. But today the game was going alright. Within fifteen minutes, Slytherin and Gryffindor had each scored two goals apiece. Draco and Smith were circling the pitch, flying so high above that they were now no bigger than dots in the clear grey-blue sky.

Rose tapped restlessly on the railing, waiting for some real action, for a quick, decisive move. She wanted to play so badly. Her nerves hummed and she shifted her feet impatiently. Quidditch was her lifeblood – it was *her* game. She must have been mad, simply mad, to attack Padma and lose out from the game for a whole year. It was just so damned unfair. Resentment against Padma, against herself, the staff, Dumbledore shimmered. She wanted to be out there, flying high overhead, adrenaline pumping through her veins, *doing* something. She’d have caught the Snitch by now – Smith was *nothing* compared to her. She was brilliant. She deserved to play, right now. She’d gladly take a year’s worth of detention if only she was allowed to play... even one sweet match would be bliss.

“Foul for the Gryffindor side!”

“Draco should be up there,” Rose muttered to Neville. “Why does he have to come down and look – Smith is still up there. Seriously, what gives? He’s completely useless.”

“He isn’t that bad,” Neville said reasonably. “Well,” he added quickly at Rose’s furious glare, “he’s not up to your league – no one is, of course, – but still, he’s...”

“Good reserve material,” Rose said balefully. “Just because his daddy’s rich doesn’t mean he should get everything he asks for. Quidditch is serious business, it’s not frolic and games...”

“You really should get married to Wood,” Neville said gravely. “You talk a lot like him.”

“Pity he’s a Gryff,” Rose said flippantly. “He has a sexy accent.”

“And a good body,” Neville said evenly.

“Yeah,” Rose grinned. “But, like I was saying, Quidditch is meant only for the talented, the ambitious, the ruthless, the cunning...”

“Hufflepuff has a pretty good team too, and they’re not supposed to be ambitious or cunning...”

“Badgers can eat snakes,” Rose said dolefully, running her fingers through her shoulder-length hair. “Their strength lies in their team loyalty and perseverance. Did you know they won the House Cup nineteen times in a row in the fifties? That’s the highest consecutive record in about three hundred years... I hope Slytherin wins this year. Then, we’ll have nine consecutive victories to our credit.”

“Five goals to Gryffindor, four to Slytherin,” Jordan was saying. “And it looks like the Gryffindor Seeker’s seen the Snitch...”

Rose clung to the railing, peering at the red-and-gold speck, which was zooming towards the earth at a furious speed. Before anyone could catch on, she suddenly let out a piercing scream, practically hanging out of the balcony and howling, “It’s a truncated Wronski Feint! Draco, don’t fall for it!”

Draco, being too far away and riding too fast, did not hear her. While Smith zoomed out of the dive at seventy feet above the ground – a very safe distance, there really had been no danger involved for him, unlike in a real Wronski Feint – and performed an airy butterfly loop, Draco, unable to control his broom, slammed into the ground with a sickening crunch of broken bones.

“Yeowch,” Neville said, wincing and wrinkling his nose as time-out was declared. “That’s got to hurt.”

Rose was almost crying. “That berk!” she howled, slamming the railing, while the rest of Slytherin roared it’s anger and Gryffindor

screamed in joy. “He was copying me – I did the Feint last year, and I didn’t do a sissified, truncated version either! My God, Draco’s fucking dim; I would never have fallen for it! It wasn’t even that good – a truncated version technically ends fifty feet, not freaking seventy, above the ground! What a coward, that Smith is! I hope Draco dies, serves him right for entering Quidditch when he’s just a bleeding talentless sod!”

She blew her nose tragically, a few tears sparkling on her cheeks. Neville sighed, pulled up a clean, white handkerchief and tossed it to her. “It’s alright,” he said consolingly, “Even if we lose now, this is only our first match and...”

“I will so *murder* Smith and Draco,” Rose hissed, dabbing at her face with the handkerchief. “Those children have absolutely no idea of what they’re doing! They’re murdering Quidditch with their lack of originality and forethought! Green man-whores, both of them!”

To his credit, Neville patted her shoulder and patiently listened to her rant and rave until the game ended seventeen minutes later – Slytherin seventy, Gryffindor two hundred and ten. Of course, then he had listen to her tirade against Smith – “It rolled up his sleeve and he didn’t even feel it! Then it flew out and he started screaming and Draco was just about to catch it, until Smith put out his arm and grabbed it! His lack of aesthetic sense is truly appalling!” – for the rest of the night.

**000**

“Why do you write so much in that diary?”

Rose glanced up from her diary and offered Neville a sly smile. “Why do you spend so much time talking with Creevey?” she asked playfully.

“We’re friends,” Neville said pragmatically. “We share the same interests – photography, painting...”

“Talking about you,” Rose said easily, shutting the diary. She leant against her armchair and stared across the Common Room into the flames dancing in the hearth. The sixth-years, with their superior

muscle power, had shoved them out of the best seats by the fire earlier that evening. It really was no fair, she thought enviously, watching them. They didn't even need the extra warmth and light, while *she* did. They weren't even doing anything useful – unless groping each other wildly and chatting about how 'creative' Francesca Langley was, for a Hufflepuff, counted as useful.

"Well, that just proves my point, doesn't it?" Neville argued, giving the diary a disdainful look. "Don't tell me you share any common interests with that bundle of parchment wrapped up in tinsel."

"It's not tinsel," Rose said sulkily. "It's *velvet*. Emerald velvet for your information, embellished with fanciful arabesques of polished silver and beaten gold..."

"Too high on bling," Neville said skeptically. "What's an arabesque, by the way?"

Rose was about to explain what it was – though she wasn't quite too sure herself – when he interrupted. "But that's not the point, the point is that you spend way too much time with that..."

"And if I do?" she asked, a little coldly. "I've done my homework, you're not talking to me because..."

"I have *work* to do!" Neville insisted. "Serious, important, vital work which will brook no interruptions." He brandished the raggedy scrap of parchment he'd been working on for the past half-hour at her menacingly. "This, my sheltered innocent, is a piece of high art, akin to haute couture only in artsy terms, which will one day command a high price in the international markets!"

"Looks like a rag," Rose said frankly. "An ugly rag, covered with scribbles."

"Abstract," Neville said grandly, sounding a little like Pansy when she was feeling particularly High-and-Mighty. "It's a *nouveau* concept which is beyond the understanding of a layman."

"I know what abstract art means, even though I'm a layman," Rose said. "It means attacking a piece of paper with all the colors in the

rainbow and then crossing your fingers and praying it doesn't turn out looking like owl droppings."

Neville looked like he was going to have a stroke at her words. "You have no appreciation of the higher artistic principles," he finally breathed. "Of the exquisite, subtle science, which was brought to its pinnacle by the greatest of all mortals – Picasso!"

"Who's Picasso?" Rose asked curiously. "Was he an artist?"

Neville looked like he wanted to die now. "Heresy!" he whispered hoarsely. "You... you..." He simply looked incapable of normal speech.

Rose laughed and opened the diary again. "That's the reason I'm writing in it," she said cheerfully. "You'll probably explode if I say anything else."

Neville let it pass at that, muttering about blasphemous mortals, who would be deported to the pits of hell for their sacrilegious words. According to him, they had to be deported to training camps, where they would be instructed on the mysteries of Baroque and Cubism twenty hours everyday. All for the sake of the greater good, of course.

**000**

"Why is there red paint down your neck?" Millicent asked puzzled. "Did you go out somewhere, Rose?"

Rose had just woken up and was wandering around, looking for a clean shirt – she'd forgotten to put her things into the laundry basket. "Mmm?" she muttered, still a bit sleepy. "Why should there be red paint down my neck?"

Tracey looked up from Pansy's bed where she was browsing aimlessly through a catalogue for cosmetics. "There's not much of it," she said kindly. "I bet a good wash should make it go away."

"Odd," Rose muttered, looking down distractedly at herself. "I don't remember getting up or dousing myself in red paint."



"It could be chicken blood," Millicent said cheerfully.

"Or tomato juice," Rose said sardonically.

**000**

*November 25,*

*Mon poulet,*

*Did you know poulet means prostitute in French? It also means chicken in English.*

*Yes, yes I know you think I've probably gone senile – your lack of trust in me, grieves me – but the fact is, your last letter was hilarious enough to make anyone go around the bend. Don't worry, I know it was supposed to be very sad and depressing – and really, I sympathize about the Quidditch match and the fact that Lockhart is still alive to torment you – but, the melodramatic element in it was just a bit too high, and... well, if you cry hard enough, I guess you have to start laughing. Your letter was pretty snigger-worthy.*

*Poor little wittle Rose... Neville wrote and told me you fainted in Herbology class. Why didn't you tell me? Being the caring, considerate godfather I am, I didn't tell your parents – though I ought to have. You really shouldn't keep us in the dark about things like that – there's no shame in fainting. It doesn't mean you're weak or anything. I hope you've been eating properly though.*

*About the Quidditch match, well, yes, I'm very sorry Slytherin lost – honestly I am, I'm on your team now – but it is your fault that you did that to Padma Patil. I know it sounds harsh, but since I haven't been harsh with you on this before, I feel it's time for me to be. This is going to be a serious letter (you've probably fallen off your chair in surprise).*

*People make mistakes. They misjudge. They lose control of themselves. That's only human and it's alright. What's not alright is not learning lessons from your mistakes.*

*You have a bad temper. You know that. Try to control it. Count to a hundred. Take deep breaths. Focus on why you're angry, and then try to let it out. This is pretty basic advice, and I guess, you know it, but try it. For my sake, at least. It's not your fault that you get angry so quickly – it's just well, there. It's something about you. What is your fault is that you're doing nothing about it. I've heard it said that anger is like a drug – give it an inch and it'll take over you. Don't feed it, don't nurse it – stamp the hell out of it. Anger is not strength – it's weakness.*

*Of course, all that advice is from someone who can control his temper – no, I'm not being sarcastic about you; I swear, I'm not – so it may sound kind of arrogant and armchair-advocate-ish. We all have our character flaws. Getting mad is yours and holding a grudge too long is mine. I did something in fifth year that I didn't regret for ten years. It involved your father, Moony, your Uncle Peter, and Professor Snape.*

*Yes, I mentioned your Uncle Peter. I haven't mentioned him in words or in a letter for the last five years. You know the basic story – he was one of my best friends in school, he worked for You-Know-Who as a spy during the war years, he was Harry's godfather and visited around till you were seven, and then we never spoke about him again. He was a good man, Rose, always kind, fun-loving, sympathetic, ingenious in his own way, and very, very chivalrous. I hated him for years, after the truth came out about him. I knew he'd betrayed us, done a thing that I felt I'd rather die than do. Maybe, twenty years ago when I was still just a kid, I'd rather have died than betrayed those I loved. I was a stupid kid, incredibly immature, even when I 'grew up'. We all were, but maybe Peter was the wisest of us all.*

*Your dad doesn't feel that way, I know – actually we've never brought up the topic, and neither have Remus and I – but I've just been thinking and trying to, you know, analyze his motives or whatever and, well...*

*Here's my theory. Peter betrayed the Order in his way so that he could protect us – your parents, me, Remus, even you in a way. He passed information about the movements of a unit, but he kept the details about a select group of individuals completely secret. Think*

*about it – none of us came to any real hurt after he joined You-Know-Who. That incident in Newcastle – where your dad lost his finger and I got my beautifully, artistically scarred back – was before Peter joined, we know. He was intimidated into joining the DEs as an informer, yes, but I guess that he thought he could actually help us – even a little – by joining. Who knows? It's just possible.*

*What about the incident in fifth year, you're probably thinking. Well, on to that too... you know how we were with Snape at school. I used to think I was the smart one, that I could get away with anything and, one day, I told Snape about your Uncle Moony. Well, not in so many words. He was always nosing around trying to know more about us and I told him that if he pressed the knot at the base of the Whomping Willow – I'm sure Remus told you – on a full moon night and went through the tunnel, he'd see where Remus disappeared to every month.*

*Full moon. Curious, fifteen-year-old kid. Werewolf.*

*Yeah, yeah, I know.*

*I told Peter about it like it was the best joke in the world, and then he slapped me and ran to James. James, being James, went and got Snape out before he was made mince-meat. And, um, he wasn't in his Animagus form then. Daring, nerve, and chivalry... that's what sets Gryffindors apart, eh? Only, the older I get, it seems to me like it's only your father who fulfils all those qualities – Remus isn't daring, Peter didn't have the nerve to not join (he was a better man than I gave him credit for years ago, but he wasn't the man I thought he was when we were friends), and I badly lack chivalry.*

*I didn't feel guilty about that incident then – aside from a residual sense of oh-we-almost-got-busted. I felt Snape deserved it, and like I said, I used to think that the world revolved around me – so did James, but he kind of got out that by seventh year. It's been nearly twenty years now. I've had time to think those things over, and I guess I feel as bad about it as I ever will.*

*Remus was furious at me, though he didn't show it – much. You know when Ron gets mad at you and Neville, but he never tells you? Yeah, Remus used to be a lot like that. We became a lot less close because*

*I guess he started to think that if I could betray his condition like that – and it was betrayal – then, maybe I might be the mole (we all suspected there was one in the Order)... And he started acting a little colder with me, and then I started thinking he was being so distant with me because he had secrets to hide, so I went and got all suspicious on him...*

*We never suspected Peter. I know it doesn't sound like it now that you know what he's done, but he was a really, really sweet person. Yes, boys can be sweet, and Peter was the sweetest teenage boy I've ever met. Remus was gentle and shy, but he had no talent with girls – not the way we did. I was – and still am – sexy, James was Jamesy, and Peter was the kind of boy who never forgot your birthday. You know the kind of blokes who hold doors open for girls, actually listen to their problems, randomly dish out compliments, and give them flowers on their first dates – Peter was like that even before we started investing in books like Ways to Bewitch Seductive Sorceresses. I miss him, actually.*

*How's that for a serious letter, hmm?*

*Hugs and Kisses,*

*Siriusly yours*

*PS: A thousand apologies for the horrendous pun. I just had to put it in – for old times' sake.*

**A/N: Too busy to review reply right now... I'll get back to everyone later I promise! And a COS-esque incident comes in the next chapter... XOXO everyone.**

## ***Blood will pay for Blood***

*For the one who speaks besides his tongue*

*Shall learn all is not good and fair*

*All in vain - the search that never ends*

*Action, reaction*

*Still no words come clear*

## **Shadowlit Facades**

“Did you hear the Minister and his wife are separating?”

Tracey promptly dropped the Transfiguration book she'd been studying – though whether she'd managed to acquire any gems of wisdom might remain a question to the astute observer, who would surely not have failed to notice she'd been holding her book upside-down for the past half-hour, – with a squeal, “What? No way, Pansy! Tell me more – wait a minute, are you making this up? Come on, don't make that sphinx face, spill!”

“There's nothing much to tell,” Pansy said, waving the December issue of *Witch Weekly* airily before reading out, “*In an exclusive interview with our correspondent, Rita Skeeter, Varinia Crouch nee Rosier, well-known as the Minister's elegant and discreet lady, and Philippa Crouch nee Yaxley, the acclaimed beauty, have revealed that...*”

“Rita Skeeter?” Millicent snorted contemptuously and leaned back against the bed frame. “If you're going to believe her you might as well start believing the editor of *The Quibbler*. She's about as bright as a disemboweled toad.”

Tracey and Pansy both squealed aghast. “No, no Milli – she's so honest and truthful, she's always on the people's side, never writes an untrue word about anyone! Well, she might be a bit harsh, but at least she doesn't write those awful lies like those journalists on the Prophet!”

“Bulstrode, you’re a walking, talking brain aneurysm. Your petty jealousy does great discredit to your family name – though, of course, considering *what* your grandmother was, I suppose it’s not unexpected.”

“I *do* hate it when upstarts with no pretense to an honored – or even known – family name begin the name-calling game. Perhaps they would do well to mind the proverb about persons residing in glass houses,” Daphne announced with an appropriately snooty accent. She darted a malevolent glance across the dormitory at Pansy before adding, “At least Millicent’s family has had the privilege to wed a few of it’s daughters to esteemed houses – the Blacks and the Greengrasses, for example. Your surname, Parkinson, has never shown up on any of the superior lines in *Nature’s Nobility*. Of course, your dear mamma hopes you shall one day – by whatever means – receive Draco’s hand in marriage. Be warned though, should that fortuitous event ever occur I shall *personally* apply an antidote to Amortentia to every single drink at the wedding feast. Princes – howsoever hideous they are in appearance – do not willingly marry pugs.”

“Pug or royal bitch? Personally if I was the prince I’d take the pug any day,” Rose said quietly, pulling back the hangings around her bed and flashing a bright smile at Daphne. “You know who you should get married to, Daph? You-Know-Who. I mean, you’ll make such a perfect couple together – you won’t get anyone with better blood than him, which seems to be the only thing you’re looking for actually, and neither of you are very subtle either – he wants world domination, you want everyone to worship you because you’ve memorized *Nature’s Nobility*. Woohoo.”

Daphne’s eyes glinted as she ran a slim finger through her shoulder-length, blond hair. “Pearls are wasted on swine; subtlety is wasted on the hoi polloi. I do not object to either until they choose to make themselves objectionable. In such cases, as any child will agree, the nuances of the graceful games of the mind are best left unexploited.”

“A thousand apologies,” Rose said coolly, sitting upright in bed now. She shut the diary and said, “We’re all beneath Your Royal Highness. None of us have the glorious blue blood of the Greengrasses.”

"Your father's blood is bluer by far than me," Daphne said sardonically, her mouth twisting wryly. "When a son of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black chooses to take his sister to bed, their natural daughter's blood must naturally be purer than that of a humble scion of the Greengrass clan. And, of course, her son would be..." She let the sentence trail, unspoken words lingering in the air. "But, of course," she added, "Such things are unfitting topics of discussion in front of a good, little Gryffindor girl." She looked like she expected Rose to say something, to ask a question but Rose, gripping the bedpost with white knuckles, didn't rise to the bait. What could she say?

Suddenly she stood up and threw out her arms theatrically. "Who are you?" she asked the others – Pansy curled up hostile, on her bed, Tracey, frightened, Millicent, tight-lipped, sitting next to her on the same bed, and Rose leaning against a bedpost carelessly, the dangerous glimmer in her eyes belying her casual stance. Barefoot, Daphne walked to the centre of the room and announced, "You besmirch the dignity of Slytherin with your actions and attitudes – and I speak not of blood status, for that is immaterial now. Crass, crude, blundering fools the lot of you – indeed, it shames me sometimes to call myself a Slytherin. If you had any sense of honor left you would throw yourselves off the Astronomy Tower now, instead of continuing further as you are."

She looked at Pansy and Tracey as she hissed, "worthless dolls," and at Millicent as she murmured, "conceited oaf". She simply spat at Rose and then swept, with an air of unconcern, her back to Rose – which in itself, was quite a brave action then – towards her bed where she vehemently drew the hangings shut.

"All in favor of unleashing a Mandrake on her, say aye," Rose said finally in the ensuing silence.

"Aye!" "Aye!" Pansy and Millicent quickly agreed, but Tracey was silent.

"Well?" Pansy demanded, shaking her friend's shoulder. "Don't you agree Greengrass deserves what's coming to her?"

Looking thoughtful, Tracey shook her head. "Maybe she's upset about something..." she began tentatively.

"Or she's just a prima donna bitch," Rose snapped. "Tracey, you can't stick up for her!"

"There's only one thing you can say in her favor," Millicent said loudly, "she's turning out to be just like her mother. Cassiopeia Lestrangle... ah, she was the whore of Hogwarts in her day. Why else should blood status be *immaterial* to that fucking princess? She's not as pure as she wants us to pretend. And I mean that in both ways."

"If you're implying..." Pansy began but Millicent cut her off with a harsh, "I'm stating facts. I don't need to imply anything. Meghna Gangopadhyay, Cassiopeia Lestrangle, and Emperatriz Normanson... ah, the best of friends weren't they, Pans? And then they became Mrs. Patil, Mrs. Greengrass, and Madam Seven-Surnames. Of course, we know their children."

*Blaise's grandparents had the heart to name his mother "Emperatriz"?* Oh dear god... was Rose's first thought.

"Parvati and Padma wouldn't touch Blaise with a seven-foot long pole," Pansy murmured, eyes shining, looking for all the world like a girl who'd uncovered a groundbreaking, earth-shattering secret that would change the course of human destiny. "And Blaise is always so open to experimentation and, of course, nobody's ever accused Daphne dearest of being a prude... I expect she was just so grateful that someone found her attractive – not many do, but I guess, it's not really her fault, with Asteria as a half-sister – that she didn't consider anything at all... Oh Milli, you're brilliant."

"Thank you, I already knew that," Millicent said proudly, while Rose and Tracey listened, nonplussed.

"Wait a minute," Rose said slowly. "Are you suggesting that Blaise and Daphne, er...slept with each other?"

Pansy and Millicent blinked at Rose and then looked at each other, slow grins forming on their faces. "Of course, we have no concrete proof," Millicent said serenely.



“And it isn’t right to judge people,” Pansy said, looking like a demure, little angel. All she needed was a golden halo and a pair of shining wings, really.

“But we have our suspicions,” Millicent said. “Yes, damning suspicions, steeped in blackest, most bleak iniquity and...”

“You’ve been expanding your vocabulary,” Rose said acidly. “If you two did the same for your brains, perhaps you’d be of average intelligence. Get this into your heads – people of our age do not have sex with other people of our age, or with other people of any age. Got it?”

“Of course, we’re not suggesting the incident occurred at Hogwarts,” Millicent said placidly, apparently not minding the insult. “We prefer to assume it occurred perhaps four or five years in the past. That would certainly explain the lukewarm attitude of both parties concerned, at present.”

Rose’s jaw dropped as she digested the implications. “You people are freaks,” she said bitterly, pulling the hangings violently around her bed, “Sick, black-minded perverts...”

**000**

*December 3*

*What were we talking about again?*

**Do you really expect me to recollect every single nauseatingly tedious, minute detail of the travesty that is your angst-ridden, young life?**

*Er...*

**Let’s play a game, shall we? I need a moment of distraction.**

*PMSing much?*

**Your crude words fill my heart with repugnance. I wonder sometimes... why do I linger so long with such a conceited young creature?**

*Because you're an inanimate object?*

**That was distinctly ill-bred of you... to call upon my state of nonexistence in such a manner! Perhaps Miss Greengrass was correct about one thing in the course of her long-winded, slightly disoriented speech – you girls lack subtlety.**

*Pearls before swine remember? I'd rather be a pig than a little pureblood princess like her. Anyway, you said something about a game?*

**Oh yes. I love games. Doesn't everyone? Games are a source of entertainment, of recreation, which serve to lighten our minds and draw us gently from the tedium and general anxieties of life... indeed in that way they are I believe comparable to a glass of sparkling white wine. Don't you simply adore champagne?**

*Um... you sound a bit light-headed.*

**So do you – when you're talking about Quidditch. You have your silly, little carousel on flying sticks, I have my wine.**

*Actually you don't.*

**You are a most off-putting child. I wanted to play a game.**

*You need therapy. Badly.*

**Pick a place – aside from the Quidditch field.**

*Library?*

**Pick a time.**

*Two o' clock?*

**Pick among these: Walls, Floor, Ceiling, Bookshelves.**

*Floor.*

**Small, medium, or big?**

*Big.*

**Tame or wild?**

*Wild.*

**Now wasn't that fun?**

*It was weird. What's up with you?*

**I'm in a good mood. Look at this I'm smiling at you. XD :) XD :)  
Isn't it pretty?**

*I'm just going to give you time to relax right now... good night.*

**Sweet dreams, my dear.**

**000**

*A specter in white prowls down the dark, stone corridors of the mighty castle. Flame-hued pajama legs, the color a child might choose, flash out from underneath the white robe. She glides, such a slender creature, her step so light, into a patch of ethereal moonbeams. Soft moonshine dances over her pale face and a hint of green flashes in the depths of the almond-shaped eyes. Is she a ghastly apparition of the night, wrought of shadow and moonlight, who shall dissolve into the dust ere daybreak? Or is she a mortal child, a creature of flesh and warm blood? There is no telling.*

*She slides into the darkness as easily as some bright image from a mirror, as easily as a wraith, which can exist only in the quietude and death of night. She holds her robe high above the glimmering pools of still water that garland the flagstones like shining beads, at the bidding of a voice that speaks only in her mind – "Mind the water. You don't want your robes to get wet – it might rouse suspicion". She stares at the writhing, stone serpents on the basin, at their cold, dead*

*eyes and murmurs, her voice deep and strong, confident like the voice of a young man who knows the lore of the serpents – “Azardie.”*

*Azardie. Open.*

*And the eyes of the serpents sparkle into life, gleaming jewel-bright, piercing the darkness with pinpricks of blazing light. Ancient stone groans in protest at the intrusion, as it splits and opens, and she steps nimbly back as the wide abyss spreads before her. Lightly, quickly, she strides forward – no longer the fair, gliding handmaiden of the night, she strides – and descends down the chasm, which holds no fears for her. Her step is no longer light; her stride lengthens like a man’s, not a child’s, as she finally enters the high-vaulted chamber, its floor littered with pieces of bone and skin. A carpet of dust, vestiges of a millennium of neglect, muffles her footsteps.*

*The wizened face of Salazar Slytherin peers down at this new traveler, this child of his blood and spirit, from the head of an intricately carved pillar, as she approaches his most prized weapon, his basilisk. Layers and layers of skin, so high that even the layers rise above her head, clad in scales as hoary-grey as the dust that carpets the hidden stone, spread before her. A smile that is seldom found on the faces of children, a smile more fitted for a conquistador prepared to sate his bloodlust, stretches over her face as she murmurs, involuntarily, “So, there really is a God out there.”*

*Her first touch – a slap actually – is but the lightest of caresses to this massive creature. She moves quickly towards the dormant beast, until she is right in front of its eye. Standing upright she is just at level with the closed eye. A wand is withdrawn and golden sparks flash and brighten the black chamber for but a second. It is enough – on a human, the curse would have rent agony, on a basilisk, it is equal to the stab of a needle.*

*“Unsouea. Unsouea, syremia lessha!” Awaken. Awaken, brother of my blood.*

*The voice that rings through the chamber, resonating on the sound, loud enough even for a basilisk, is not her own. It is the voice of a man who has not screamed out for too long, for eleven years. The little, silver knife does its task and before the monster can open one*

*large, amber-colored eyeball, human blood shines on human flesh and is pressed against scale. She spreads her arms on its skin, scarlet with her blood, blood flowing from the twin scars on both arms, and moves down the length of its head. It is her blood that crimson the ancient scales and her arms, blood still pouring forth, which lie for many moments on the rough, heavy tongue that is unrolled slowly. The basilisk drinks it's fill of blood, gorges itself until it is sated.*

*"We have much to do, you and I," she whispers and says it again in the tongue of the serpents, that exquisite, ornate language of power, Parseltongue. The time is come, for blood to pay for blood.*

**000**

Someone was shaking her. Hard. Through slitted eyes, Rose glimpsed a curtain of golden-red hair that seemed to hang around her, a slender, tensed rigid arm bathed in a dull greenish glow and two frightened brown eyes. Tracey, she thought dizzily and closed her eyes again. Someone was calling her name, telling her to wake up but she wouldn't, *couldn't*, she was exhausted and she wanted to be left alone, alone or maybe with a mug of Invigorating Draught...

"Do you think we should let her sleep?" Tracey whispered urgently to Millicent and Pansy. "Look at her face – she looks so washed-out."

Pansy shook her head and held up a hand for Tracey to keep quiet. Then she went over and knelt by Rose's bed, her mouth at Rose's ear-level. "Filch, Mrs Norris, Pince, Penelope Clearwater and Rima Sachs were found dead in the library two hours ago," she hissed viciously.

"What?" Rose mumbled, her eyes flickering open. "What are you-"

"I thought you'd like to know," Pansy said curtly, rising to her feet. "Classes have been cancelled today and none of us are supposed to get out of our Common Rooms today."

"Nobody knows what happened," Tracey said nervously, perching on the footboard of Rose's bed. "McGonagall saw the library door open at four o'clock – it's six-ten by the way – and when she went to investigate-"

“She saw them lying out on the floor,” Millicent finished, “*Blood will pay for blood. The Chamber of Secrets has opened.* That’s what was written all over the floor – and then she saw they were dead and Dumbledore called a special prefects’ meeting and loads of stuff has been happening, but you slept right through it!”

“Come on Milli,” Pansy said suddenly, looking at Rose through narrowed eyes. “I think she wants to sleep right now.” She grabbed Tracey’s arm and steered her purposefully towards her bed.

“In case you’re hungry,” Millicent said kindly, before getting up and joining her friends, “They’re having breakfast down in the Common Room.”

Rose lay in bed quietly for a moment, rubbing her aching forehead. Then suddenly she tossed off the covers and got to her feet. Sliding as quickly as she could into slacks, a baggy shirt, mismatched socks and shoes she popped a few of Tracey’s mints into her mouth – there really was no time to brush her teeth. Tracey, Millicent and Pansy were huddled on the latter’s bed, their shoulders hunched, their arms wrapped around each other – three little, picture-perfect statuettes of frightened submission. As she ran a rough hand through her tangled black hair, Rose couldn’t help but feel a surge of contempt for the three, for looking so scared, so anxious. Four people and a cat had died. Yes, it was scary but what good was looking so scared going to do? Actually it might do more harm than good.

She couldn’t make head or tail of the matter – there were so many loose ends and confusing things in the story that she could hardly understand it now, and her aching head didn’t make matters easier. *Neville*, she thought vaguely, *he’ll know everything*. It was a comforting thought – Neville was good at mystery-solving (not that she wasn’t, of course, but he was better), he had more information than her by now and well he was just Neville. Even if he didn’t understand he’d pretend he did and that’d do for today.

The Common Room was crammed. Girls and boys, most of them still in robes, pajamas and nightgowns, their hair unkempt, their faces free – for once – of make-up clustered together in small groups. For once, the seventh-years acted like adults instead of spoilt brats –

Rose spotted a few of them comforting the first-years, genuinely kind expressions on their faces. The younger students all looked uniformly scared, puzzled or excited but the older ones' faces were a study in contrasts – from some who looked exhilarated, their mouths forming the word *blood* and reminding her (as if she needed it) that she was in the Slytherin Common Room. Others with narrowed eyes and thin lips hissed *newspapers* and *political games*, while others still maintained carefully-blank, polite expressions and perfect poker faces, unwilling to commit themselves.

As she made her way towards the loaded breakfast table – eying the pale, harried-looking prefects, their wands out, at the entrance-ways warily – the hum of conversation seemed to intensify.

“Penny Clearwater, that 'Claw perfect, right-”

“Glad it was Filch, at least...” “Marcus, stop joking about these things!”

“The Chamber of Secrets – blimey, I think it's mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History*, but I don't have my copy-” “Nothing important is ever mentioned in that book, Laurine.”

“*Blood will pay for blood*, eh? Talk about apocalyptic.”

She downed a hot glass of coffee, and then another quickly. Her tongue burned but her head felt clearer. Wrapping four hot buns richly smeared with butter and raspberry jam just the way she like it, in a napkin, biting into a muffin and picking up another she wondered whether she had enough food for an entire breakfast. She could never make do without two omelets in a proper breakfast but she guessed that she'd have to skip that today. It was no joke trying to carry down so much food to the boys' dormitories.

“You won't be able to eat so much!” Flint called out as he saw her going downstairs but she grinned and waved at him – nearly dropping the other muffin. Gingerly, she treaded down the stone steps to the second year boys' dorms and knocked impatiently on it with her foot, her hands full. A few seconds later, a pale, blond boy opened it, his face hardening as he saw her.

"I'm staying," she said curtly. She knew she looked pretty disgusting – she was still eating her muffin – but she didn't really care. Draco's opinions of her were unimportant. In fact, *he* was unimportant. Like she'd expected, Neville was sitting on his bed. Heck, he was even sitting like she'd imagined – his knees drawn up, his arms linked around and his chin resting on them, the posture he used when he was thinking hard.

"Hello," he said absently, not even looking at her, as she bounced in and tipped all the food she'd gathered on his bed. Aside from the three of them, the dorm was empty and she vaguely wondered where Blaise was. Blaise always seemed to have an answer for everything. She lay down comfortably on his bed and took a bun. To her surprise, Draco drew up a footstool near Neville's bed and actually sat on it. This was practically the closest they'd been to each other in three months.

Neville's lips were pursed up like when he was concentrating on something and so Rose chose not to disturb him. The buns could do with her attention. Finally, he let his arms slip and fall from his knees and sat up straighter, though his knees were still drawn up. "What took you so long?" he asked, though he didn't sound very interested. Before she could answer, he turned matter-of-factly to Draco and said, "Get me Theodore's copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. Rose hand me my sketchpad and um, that purple sketching pencil, the one with the golden feather." Without thinking to dispute, they hurried to get him his things while he rummaged for his camera.

"Colin took pictures," he said blandly, "And sent them to me. We set up contacts to transfer pictures to each other over our cameras a few weeks ago – it's a simple spell, Hermione helped us research it. Before curfew Colin managed to weasel his way to the library – wish I'd woken up early enough. I would have taken better ones – but here, take a look at these."

Rose glanced briefly at them – the words in red on grey stone. "Looks like blood."

"Might have been," Draco said darkly. "Didn't you hear about the message whoever well, did it, wrote?"



“Whoever wrote it has horrible handwriting,” Neville said. He closed his eyes and leaned against the headboard, his cheeks tinged faintly pink. “Don’t laugh at me, alright? This is just um, my surmise – whoever wrote it is used to writing with their right hand but they wrote it with their left last night, or vice-versa. I thought about it because those letters kind of reminded me about how you write when you’re writing with your left hand – your letters seem to bend a bit to the back, and they’re kind of clumsy. Maybe that’s a universal characteristic when you’re not used to writing with your left hand. Or it could be the opposite, you know. Wish I could go to the library.”

“That’s... deep,” Rose said quietly. “But it sounds incredibly flawed. I mean you can’t just compare my-”

“Just an example,” Neville said off-handedly. “And of course it’s probably flawed – I’m not Sherlock Holmes.”

“Who?” Draco wanted to know.

“The only fictional guy my mum has a crush on,” Rose muttered.

Neville was leafing through the thousand-page-look history of Hogwarts. “Look at this,” he said, the page at 892. His finger traced down a line of closely-printed text and as Rose squinted to peer at it, he read out, *“Slytherin, his rage mounting, left one last sign of his regard, one more mark that there would never be Three but Four always, to the other Founders...”*

“Woah,” Rose said at the end, thinking hard. “Wait a minute, I remember! Uncle Sirius told us the story once, didn’t he?”

“I thought of that when I heard about everything,” Neville nodded. “And then I filched Theodore’s copy – he never reads it anyway – took me a lot of time to find what I wanted though...”

“You think too much,” Rose whispered in awe, handing him the last bun in respect of his intelligence. He grabbed it and popped it hungrily into his mouth – making her feel guilty and wonder whether he had had breakfast yet. What kind of a friend was she, giving him only the last bun and not half her own breakfast? “Do you want me to get you some more?”

He shook his head. "I'm too excited to eat. You've been in the Common Room, haven't you? Well, tell me what people are doing downstairs."

"Why?" she demanded but he shook his head and waved for her to answer him. As she began to recite dutifully the knowledge she'd gathered, Draco's eyes narrowed until she could hardly look at them and Neville's widened alarmingly. While Draco's face tightened, closed up, Neville's seemed to open, loosen.

"What do you think, Draco?" Neville asked quietly as Rose finished. He didn't turn towards the other boy and though his question was framed easily enough, with just the right note of casualness there was an underlying question, unasked, lurking within it. Rose didn't know what the question was but she knew there was a question alright.

"Some of them need to grow up," Draco answered, his knuckles very white as he clutched his hands. "They haven't considered the eventuality of spies. Others think they're grown up but they're not, really. They're just pretending to be. I'll wager you ten Galleons Crouch has already called up a meeting of the Heads of the different Departments – four people dead, and with messages like that isn't a case of school discipline anymore. It's a matter of paramount importance."

Neville was smiling, as though he'd gotten his question answered. "I'm glad you're my friend," he said sincerely to Draco.

"For as long as I need to be," Draco said, with a twisted smile. "Don't count on me forever, Neville Longbottom."

Rose got up and started pacing around the dormitory, thinking. "Crouch is going to resign, isn't he?" she asked suddenly, stopping in front of Blaise's bed, her hands resting on her slim hips. "The Gringotts' Incident last year – I mean, it could have been the account of foreign personnel couldn't it and then he'd probably be hauled up in front of the International Council of Warlocks for sabotage – and with all that mess about his son... Fudge, old Umbridge and their little coalition might have their own reasons about wanting a new Minister."

“You forgot Crouch’s behavior at the Convention this year,” Draco said, very politely. “He’s had his eye on a seat of the Warlocks for a couple of years but that’d interrupt the power balance, wouldn’t it? The Chinese aren’t so keen on another European on one of the seats; it’s bad enough with all those uncouth *Americans*...”

“Scrimgeour,” Neville said quietly, closing his eyes. “He’s just another Rita Skeeter to the public – they think he won’t lie to them, just because he’s always bitching about the corruption in the Ministry and telling them the things they want to hear in the process. I bet it’ll be Scrimgeour next, if – *when* – Crouch resigns.”

Rose fell back on Blaise’s bed. “Well,” she said laconically, when she’d recovered from the surprise. “It’ll mean another promotion for Daddy.”

“Guess you’ll be going to a few more balls in the future,” Draco said dryly. “Your father doesn’t have the clout to offend the other Heads by refusing to attend a few of those little events.”

“Why are we talking about politics?” Rose asked, wishing she could throw a pillow at Draco. Well, she could, but Neville would probably be annoyed. “I thought we were discussing the attack. Who do you think did it by the way?”

“Some of those people upstairs,” Neville said. “Either a few of those lovely Poker-Faces or someone who’s hiding in their dormitory right now – it’s got to be someone in Slytherin.”

“Why?” Rose demanded. “I know about the Chamber and that weird message but well, maybe it’s to throw us off? Maybe it’s just some psycho who needed to cover up what he’d done and...”

“The victims weren’t chosen at random,” Neville said patiently. “Pince and Clearwater are Muggleborns. Sachs’ mother was a blood traitor, Draco told me. And well, everyone knows Filch is a squib.”

“It might still be a psycho with no supremacist, blood-propaganda affiliations!” Rose insisted. “Loads of people hate Filch and Mrs Norris, Pince is annoying and everyone knows Sachs sleeps around.”

“Slept around,” Draco corrected her quietly. “She’s dead now.” His face was pale, somber and for the first time the reality of the death of the five hit Rose hard. She had thought of them as statistics, puzzles for the past hour. Now she thought of them as people. And suddenly, a face rose in front of her – a pale, sweet face dotted with freckles and with rimless spectacles, framed by thick masses of long, dark hair. Her eyes swam as she remembered the fifth-year prefect who’d shown her the way to the library twice in first year. She’d only known Penny Clearwater by sight and name – she’d been the brightest in her year – but now that she was dead everything had changed. She’d certainly had friends, a family – *have they been informed?* –, maybe pets, hobbies...

And what was she now? A word on the lips of a hundred students, a name that would live as the name of a girl who’s only claim to fame was her premature death. If she’d lived... Rose swallowed and fought back tears, wondering why she was crying. She didn’t cry easily but today she was crying for a girl she’d never given a second thought to, a girl who’d been just another name and no more to her. Maybe it was because of those three words – *if she’d lived*. Were there any sadder words than these in the English language?

“Rima Sachs was pretty,” Neville whispered. Rose noticed that his eyes, which he’d been dabbing at frantically with the napkin she’d used to bring the buns in, were red. “Even Pince wasn’t so bad, after all.”

Draco mumbled something. When Rose and Neville looked at him, he said more loudly, “You’re only crying for them because they’re dead now. Don’t you two think that’s a little hypocritical? If they were still alive you wouldn’t be crying for their troubles, so why do it now?”

Neville opened his mouth to say something but then shut it. When Draco looked expectantly at Rose were an answer, she could only stare helplessly at him. *Is he right? Are we being hypocrites?*

**000**

“Lovely,” Bellatrix Lestrange murmured, folding the *Daily Prophet* on the 5th of December and throwing it carelessly on the pearl-appliquéd

couch in Varinia Rosier's parlor. "Longbottom couldn't have chosen a better time."

She smiled as she surveyed her beautiful, patrician face in the ornate silver mirror held up a pair of marble cupids. Idly she ran an ivory-handled hairbrush through her glossy black hair and then fingered the dainty folds of her flowing lilac satin gown. It really was nice to be around so many pretty things after so many days languishing in the depths of the wilderness. She slipped off her marriage ring – a band of two golden serpents with emerald eyes –, a look of distaste marring her face and dropped it around the neck of one of the marble cupids.

A young woman in a loose pink morning robe, the wide folds concealing her pregnancy, entered with a heap of scrolls. Her dark hair tumbled loosely around her pretty face as she set the scrolls on a little gilt side-table. "Barty will be down presently, Madam Lestrange," she said formally. "These are the maps you wanted of St. Brunhilda's Maternity Centre. Varinia is will be here with breakfast soon."

"Sit with me, little Phila," Bellatrix invited her, lounging on the couch and patting the empty space next to her.

Philippa Yaxley Crouch gave her a strained smile and perched gingerly on the edge of the couch.

"I went to school with your oldest sister," Bellatrix said reminiscently. "Imelda – she died before you were born. Your father, my dear young girl, had an unfortunate propensity for dilly-dallying over trifles like expenses. The Dark Lord was not pleased with the miser your good sire was... Imelda was fourteen, I think, then. Well, anyway your father learnt his lesson quickly enough when Greyback personally delivered her pretty little body to his house one night. No expense is too great for the Dark Lord – your venerable mother has told you the story, I trust? And the moral?"

Philippa nodded, her head bowed, her lashes shading her frightened eyes.

"Good girl," Bellatrix smiled, patting her head as though she was a child. "You are full of fine scruples, my pretty little Phila, but you must

know that the infants of Mudbloods and halfbloods do not count. They are disposable. All of them.”

000

“One bottle of Vanishing-and-Reappearing Ink please.” She was a nondescript, young woman with a nondescript, easily forgettable, oval face, pale grey eyes glazed over with boredom, and shoulder-length, mousy brown hair. Dressed in an ugly charcoal-colored skirt, and a bulging, sky-blue sweater the only thing at all remarkable about her was her stupendous height – she was easily over six feet tall. Xerxes Jape didn’t bother to cover his mouth as he yawned and reached for the little emerald-green bottle she wanted from the dusty shelf. Business was always slow this time of year, a few weeks from the Christmas rush when all the little kiddies were at school.

“Here you are, Miss,” he said, wondering what scrape Gambol was getting into – *I’ll be having a word with him about how long he’s allowed to extend his lunch break to, I will.* The girl fished out a Sickie from her small, frog-green purse and slapped it on the counter before grabbing the bottle.

“Ma’am,” she drawled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and smiling mischievously. Her grey eyes sparkled with life, a dimple crept up her cheek with her smile, and Jape suddenly decided she wasn’t so plain after all. “That’s ma’am to you, Mr Jape.” And she pranced out of the shop, her hips swaying so sensuously that he was half-minded to run out of the shop and accost her for permission to Floo over to her place – wherever it was – sometimes.

000

A charcoal-colored, silk veil hung from the brim of her moss-green bonnet, obscuring her face. On Knockturn Alley, in particular at Abatantuono’s Apothecary, this was not so strange – customers usually had their own reasons to keep their identities secret. “Three quarts of *Tangi lau aitu*,” she drawled, something oddly seductive in her husky voice.

Abatantuono smiled and rubbed his plump hands – encased in dainty, white silk gloves – together. “Under British jurisdiction, my good lady,

the Polynesian drug of *Tangi lau aitu* is forbidden for private sale, under pain of..."

The woman brought out a little, frog-green purse and slapped a few Galleons on the black marble counter. "Twenty-one Galleons," she said, her voice crisp, "three quarts."

Abatantuono only had time to calculate how much that was per quart and think, *May good angels smile down upon you, kind lady*, before he managed an obsequious bow and hurried to the back of his shop.

The woman paced through the large shop, her emerald-green robes rustling, and as he searched through his crates for the illicit poison she wanted, he could hear her call out, "I will need ten quarts of Polyjuice Potion... yes, that shall suffice. I shall be by to collect it this afternoon – package it so that it might fit into a lady's clutch. The name of it escapes me right now, but if you have a little of that potion which explodes rather, er, violently when exposed to air."

"*Ballo delle fiamme* – a Sicilian specialty," he said, emerging with a dusty, black bottle. "I shall have it ready, my lady."

The woman leaned forwards to take the bottle and lowered the veil ever so slightly. Intense, steel-blue eyes under shapely, black brows sparkled at him, as she whispered conspiratorially, "Bellatrix Black thanks you." And before he could answer, her wand flashed out and he stumbled back as her Obliviating Spell hit him.

"A good day to you, my lady," Abatantuono murmured, touching his forehead and wondering why he felt so dizzy.

The woman swept out and only when she was on the cobblestone street, patched with glistening, white snow, did a low, bodiless voice whisper into her ear, "That was very dramatic of you. For a minute, you almost had me frightened."

Bellatrix laughed, a rich, throaty sound that seemed to fill the empty street. "No," she corrected him, "no, it wasn't dramatic. It was the only thing a Black could be expected to do. We Blacks always like to go out in style." She deftly circumnavigated the filthy mud puddles on the lane and swung her little purse playfully. For the first time in years

she felt like a little girl again – the world was her oyster again and she'd be damned if she didn't bloody sword it open.

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Healer Faulkner spared only a cursory glance for the cluster of young trainees from St. Mungo's who'd gathered in the atrium of St. Brunhilda's Maternity Centre. Barely out of their teens most of them, they looked more like schoolchildren than adults, legally of age, in their regulation white uniforms.

"Everyone gather together in their respective groups, please!" Faulkner called out and like obedient sheep, the children – or so they seemed to him as he peered benignly down at them, so young, so dewy-eyed, from the monumental age of fifty-seven – assembled into Groups A, B, and C. "Group A," he read out from the small notebook in front of him, "practicals – third floor, you're assigned to Healers Blake and Montgomery. Group B – accounts, second floor. Group C, you'll only be observing – you're under Healer Johnson, she's in the kitchen, ground floor. You'll be rotating shifts in two hours. Good luck to all of you." And he beamed down brightly upon all of them before exiting the room.

Shrouded in her Demiguise-hair cloak, Bellatrix trailed after the teenagers in Group C, secure in her invisibility. For good measure, she'd placed a Disillusionment Charm on herself. She knew she was being perhaps a mite too paranoid – young Barty had implied as much – but, well, better safe than sorry. A girl with rainbow-colored spikes began a conversation about the new pair of Muggle boots she'd bought – *they're a hell of a lot sexier than my boyfriend* – and Bellatrix listened contemptuously.

She thought of how she'd been at their age, at eighteen or nineteen – certainly more naïve, more starry-eyed and innocent than she was now (though at that age she'd have resented being called innocent, and really Rodolphus was the only one who'd dared call her that after she'd turned seventeen and been out on her first raid as a Death Eater). Girlish, impractical, and mule-headed certainly, she'd been little more than a child even twenty years back. Reminiscently she remembered young Bella Black again and felt an irresistible urge to



chuckle. But with the amusement there was gloom too, *They'll never make girls like me. I'm probably the last of my kind.* And even though she knew the words were shockingly presumptuous, they were what she truly felt within the knot of bright-eyed, laughing teenagers.

St. Brunhilda's wasn't just a maternity centre. Unlike St. Mungo's which catered to those afflicted by magical maladies, St. Brunhilda's had been set up four hundred years ago to deal with those wizards, witches – and the occasional magical creature – plagued by more mundane, Muggle maladies. Traditionally, unwanted Squib children had also been left on the steps of St. Brunhilda's – to be disposed of into the Muggle world. Bellatrix steered her way carefully through the crowd of witches and wizards, most of them with runny noses. Flu season was officially on.

The kitchen where the house-elves toiled, providing food for the healers, expectant mothers, and anyone who cared to order a meal from St. Brunhilda's – and everyone who was interested in the latest craze over organic food did – was a marvel of modern designing. Everywhere Bellatrix looked as the trainees trailed down in search for Healer Johnson she saw sleek, clean lines and the colors silver and white. It was very... pretty, she supposed, but not exactly her taste.

Solid wooden floors, ochre walls, and bunches of sweet-smelling herbs hanging everywhere that was what she expected of a kitchen. That was the way it was in all the kitchens she'd ever been in – at Grimmauld Place, Malfoy Manor, Rodolphus's (and hers, she supposed) castle. It wasn't traditional and everything that wasn't quite traditional always managed to unsettle her, at least a little.

But she didn't have time to stand and wonder who'd been in charge of the interior design of St. Brunhilda's kitchen. Treading lightly on the white tiles and making sure she did not accidentally brush against some elf she maneuvered her way to the massive platter of chocolate cake in the centre of the kitchen. Everyone ate cake, Bellatrix knew from experience. Aside from contaminating the water supply – which she would have done if she could – it was her best open source. Gingerly unscrewing the cap of the black bottle over which she'd cast a Disillusioning Charm, she doused the cake with three quarts of *Tangi lau aitu*. The colorless liquid spilled over the edges, making

the chocolate glisten as though someone had poured some transparent syrup over it and, unconsciously, she licked her lips hungrily.

After the bottle was done, she Apparated as quietly as she could – hoping that the general din in the kitchen would obscure the sound – into the atrium again. Bartemius had had time to do his work. Now came the tricky part. Hastily rearranging her features, she strode into the centre of the atrium. It was fairly crowded – Healers rushing past, bored receptionists answering patients' queries, women of all ages gossiping and laughing about their children. Swallowing, Bellatrix gripped on to her wand to reassure herself.

And then she pulled off her cloak.

She walked calmly down the length of the atrium as Walden MacNair, dead now for nearly two months. The effect was instantaneous. "Blood will pay for blood," she hissed as she reached the doors, looking over her shoulder scornfully at the men and women who had stopped in their paths, frozen horror on their faces, and then the silence was shattered by a girl's scream. But by then Bellatrix Lestrangle was already gone.

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*"Two women dead," Lily Potter read out, her face turning a ghastly white. "Along with the children they were carrying. Analysts have pronounced the poison – which has been found to have contaminated the victims' cake – as the deadly Polynesian drug, Tangi lau aitu. Side-effects for survivors who have consumed the cake include paralysis of limbs and inevitably result in a painful death within a few weeks. Members of the Law Enforcement Squad have confirmed it is almost certainly the work of agents of terrorism. Groups and individuals under suspicion have been placed under surveillance."*

She flung the 6th December issue of the *Daily Prophet* violently on the kitchen floor and screamed for the first time in front of her children, "Fuck it!" Wide-eyed, eight-year-old Harry Potter bent down and picked up the paper, gently stroking Debacle, who had begun to hiss at Lily's outburst. At the very top of the first page, in huge letters were

emblazoned the words, *Blood will pay for blood*. Below it was the same slogan, scrawled in a man's untidy handwriting on the walls of the atrium in St. Brunhilda's Maternity Centre. Apparently it had been written in Vanishing-and-Reappearing Ink.

Snidget banged her spoon on the counter of her high chair and cried for her mother to feed her, oblivious to the world around her.

"It's horrible, terrible," Lily whispered, tears trickling down her cheeks, distractedly spooning a blob of what looked like green-colored goo – but which was actually Snidget's favorite food – into the baby's mouth. "Inhumane – to attack children who haven't even been born. And there might have been mothers who ate the cake and then nursed their children... perfectly savage."

Harry quietly scanned the rest of the paper. "*Blood will pay for blood*," he said, folding the paper neatly. "Mum isn't that what was written at..."

"Yes, I know, dearie, at Hogwarts." Lily sighed and wiped her face with the back of her hand. "You'd better hurry up and put on your shoes – you don't want to be late for school now." Harry shrugged as if to say that he couldn't care less whether he was late or not. Unlike his mother, the look on his face was more excited, and perhaps a bit resentful, rather than frightened or sad. It just wasn't fair to him that Rose at Hogwarts and Daddy, who'd been at the Ministry and St. Brunhilda's all night and had only reached home at dawn, got to experience all the cool things, first-hand.

"Go get my bag, Debacle," he said, plodding out of the kitchen, "bye Mum." The cat obediently followed him – over the past few months Harry had been training him and now he really seemed to be more dog than cat, almost literally Harry's shadow day and night.

Snow fell softly outside as tea boiled on the stove within the warm kitchen. Lily simply couldn't imagine coping with stress without a nice cup of tea – something she and her father had shared in common. She cleaned Snidget's face, her bowl, and the counter of the high-chair with a light swipe of her wand. Then Lily set the baby gently down on a very thick quilt she'd placed on the floor, with a few colorful, light-up, Muggle toys Petunia had sent when she was a

month old. Those toys were enough to keep Snidget amused for hours. Settling down on the quilt – she'd placed an Elongating Charm on it so that it nearly covered the kitchen floor, the most pleasant room in the house to her – she unfolded the newspaper again.

As she read through the four-and-a-half pages that had been devoted to the topic, a conviction that had begun to form in her mind after a conversation with Mary strengthened into hard certainty. *The Chamber of Secrets... Blood will pay for blood. Hogwarts... St. Brunhilda's. Children as the primary victims. They must be connected – and... and...*

*She's dead*, the cold voice of reason reminded her. *Expert Potioneers from the Ministry as well as St. Mungo's confirmed it at the post-mortem.*

*But what if they were bribed? Threatened? Imperiused? No third party was allowed to see the body.*

*You're delving too deep. A committee of twelve was appointed – no one could have imperiused all of them.*

*Not one single person, no. Two or three people of fairly strong magical power and long purses...*

*Don't be ridiculous.*

She rose to get her tea, to douse it generously with sugar and milk. Her eyes trailed to the little glass vase on the mahogany counter, the vase that had stood there for nearly thirteen years. For twelve of those years it had contained a (*white?*) lily and a red rose – Freshening Charms applied on them daily, they were still as beautiful as they had been –, for six months it had also carried a violet. A faint smile lit up her face as she looked at the rose and then she shuddered as another, horrifying thought crept into her mind. No matter what anybody said, Hogwarts was not safe now.

James could reassure her – unconvincingly – until he was blue in the face, Sirius could laugh and tease her about turning into Moody, and Mary – Mary, whose three children were still safely at home, too young for Hogwarts – could hold her hand and patiently listen to her

fret, but none of them were mothers with children there. Rose *had* to come home. Lily would make sure of it and even if she had to beg, borrow, or steal to do it, she would.

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"It's amazing how things change so quickly, isn't it?" Neville Longbottom threw the last of his clothes pell-mell into his trunk and snapped the lid shut triumphantly. He looked around at the other boys in the dormitory – all packing – expectantly, as though expecting them to agree and continue with his philosophical train of thought.

Draco was the only one who even grunted in acknowledgement of his statement. The others were all too busy trying to locate miscellaneous articles – shoes hidden in other people's drawers, Blaise's porn magazines, which he had to throw away (and wouldn't stop lamenting the fact), horrendous sweaters their mothers insisted they wear because they looked so 'adorable' in them, loose change that never stayed in wallets (partly due to Draco's slightly kleptomaniac tendencies), and clean sheets of paper on which Neville had not drawn pictures of Lavender Brown in her knickers.

"I mean," Neville said, falling down on his four-poster, "think about it – it's only been five days since... well, you know what, and here we are all set to go home a week before the holidays start."

"We get less time off in Easter," Vincent reminded him.

"Well, yes," Neville admitted, "but no one goes home for Easter. Christmas is *different* – the aroma of homemade cookies and cakes and gingerbread men your mother makes for you, the spirit of getting brand-new presents, all that pretty snow falling outside when you wake up... ah, doesn't it make you want to go home early?"

"My mother is holidaying in the Fiji islands," Blaise said sourly. "No pretty snow for me."

"My mother would never enter a kitchen to cook!" Draco cried, looking positively shocked. "That's what house-elves are for! And you don't even have a mother... how on earth do you know anything about *the*

*aroma of homemade cookies and cakes and gingerbread men your mother makes for you, hmm?"*

"You, Draco Aquilius Malfoy," Theodore said irritably, lying underneath his bed in search of an errant sock, "have all the sensitivity of a wild boar – and you look like one too. Of *course*, he doesn't have a mother – that statement wasn't meant to be taken at face value!"

"He hasn't had his mother for eleven years," Draco said crossly. "Why should he mind if I say that now? And at least *I* don't have a hoary-headed, inarticulate baboon for a father."

A shoe came flying out from underneath Theodore's bed to knock into his forehead. "At least my father's escutcheon is as shiny as my mother's! At least *he* isn't some jumped-up, nouveau-rich, piece of bourgeois trash, who had the luck to snag a Black Princess for himself!"

"Why you..." The rest of Draco's sentence was drowned out when Theodore aimed a pillow – with surprising accuracy for someone who spent most of his days hidden beneath piles of books – at his head.

"Children these days," Blaise sighed theatrically, his voice rising above the yelps and insults of the two boys who had now engaged in a full-fledged pillow fight. He sounded incredibly world-weary for a twelve-year-old. "They're so... immature."

Neville was about to say something – *The older you act, the younger you are* would have been an apt quotation for the moment – but thought better of it. No matter what he said Blaise would always have – would *need* to have – the last word.

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"Are you glad to be going home?" Tracey asked Rose. All of the girls had already finished packing. They'd all worked together in coordinated teamwork, helping each other find things and receiving help in return. That was why they'd all finished so fast.

“Of course I am – I can’t wait to see Uncle Padfoot and Snidget again,” Rose said. “It’s pretty cool all the parents sent letters to Dumbledore – talk about paranoid – and now we’re getting an extra week of vacation.”

“Even without those letters the Ministry would probably have insisted,” Pansy reminded her. “They’re going to be upgrading the school security system to make sure that it’ll be impregnable to outside attacks. And, of course it isn’t safe at all now – there’s only so much the teachers and prefects can do to safeguard us.”

“What if an insider was the cause of the attack?” Millicent asked thoughtfully. “Maybe one of the older students, the ones who’re over age, they might be affiliated to one of those gangs... maybe one of the healers at St. Brunhilda’s poisoned all the food there.”

“Only the cake was poisoned,” Pansy reminded her. She sighed, looking troubled, and added, in a low voice, “That was inhuman. Three more ladies and a couple of babies died as well, you know...”

“Yeah, it was horrible,” Rose said absently. “Guess the Hogwarts class a couple years from now will be smaller than the one now, eh?”

“Not really,” Millicent said thoughtfully. “Forty-three students this year... we’re a small class. Before the War there was at least sixty to seventy people per year on average... guess people just put off having babies during the War. You just wait and see how many kids turn up at the Sorting next year – loads of women started getting pregnant in ’82, after the War ended in November.”

“You really aren’t as dumb as you look, Milli,” Pansy smiled. “Sure all that troll blood must have diluted your magic quite a bit, but it looks like we’ll make a witch out of you yet.”

Millicent grinned and playfully chucked a pillow at Pansy’s head, which she deftly caught and placed back on the bed. “We’re too old now for pillow fights,” Pansy said, sounding almost wistful. “Too old, too mature.”

“You’re only as old as you want to be,” Rose said, remembering what Sirius had told her once. She picked up a pillow and threw it at Pansy. “Now who’s up for a pillow fight?”

**A/N: For all ye Blaise-lovers...**

### **Slytherin Aries**

**A Slytherin Aries is a bundle of contradictions. In some ways, they have the potential to be the strongest of their House - the intensity, drive, and brilliant visionary dreams of the Aries combined with the innate leadership skills, the charisma, and the profound sense of self (including the eccentric lack of interest in conforming to what other people think) is stuff of which great magical legends are made. However, a Slytherin Aries has much to learn about politics, knowing who is an appropriate object of trust and who is not trustworthy, knowing when to keep one's mouth shut, and knowing when to avoid acting on impulse in order to use a situation to its best advantage. Although they hate to admit it, these Slytherins are easily manipulated by more cynical, shrewd peers in the Serpent's Den. If they can learn to manage their blind spots, they will go far. Slytherin Aries types can be quite cruel, especially if they have enough physical prowess to bully smaller students; those that are not cruel can still be thoughtless and brutally tactless without actually meaning to cause damage.**

**What do you think?**

**Tangi lau aitu:** In Polynesian languages the word aitu refers to ghosts or spirits, often malevolent. In Māori mythology, the word *aitu* refers to sickness, calamity, or demons; the related word *aituā* means misfortune, accident, disaster. The Tongan word *tangi lau'aitu* (literally: cry like the aitu) means: to cry from grief, to lament.

**To kike:** Lol, thanks for all the compliments – cyber cake to you!

**To ahoyhoy:** I’ve been neglecting to answer your reviews shamefully. Tsk tsk, I enjoyed your reviews on Foxglove and Beautiful Life, Beautiful World – I’m also working on a



**Fem!Draco story (non-tragic, surprisingly) on the same vein so I hope you'll like it. As for writing professionally later... well isn't that every fanfiction writer's dream? XD**

## **Growing Pains**

*'Too many people grow up. That's the real trouble with the world, too many people grow up. They forget. They don't remember what it's like to be 12 years old. They patronize, they treat children as inferiors.'*

## **Walt Disney**

*December 20*

*"Rose, brush your hair, please." "Rose, stop playing with your food."  
"What did I tell you about making your bed, young lady?" "James, you shouldn't be encouraging her to play Quidditch out in this cold – come back in right now, both of you." "Don't punch your brother – no, I don't care if he started it, you're older, you should know better." "When are you going to start on your homework? You can't spend your days carousing around in this fashion – you're going to be in third year soon, and then you'll be sorry for dilly-dallying over your lessons now!"*

*Ugh, she's driving me crazy! It hasn't been a week and she just won't shut up, harping about stupid things all the time. I'd rather be back at Hogwarts, even if it's not safe now. Anything's better than staying at home with this Gorgon! She's always scolding me about how thin I've become – it is called a GROWTH SPURT, she just likes to pretend I'm still shorter than her when I'm exactly the same height – and telling me to eat my carbs and stuff. She's such a worry-wart, I never noticed – well, yeah I did, but not that much – screaming if even a single thing's out of place, moaning about how abysmal my marks are, blah blah.*

*She never forgets to remind me about the star student SHE used to be, top of the year, all the teachers' pet, serious about what she wanted to do in life, how she spent her free time doing advanced research, how hard she worked, how little guidance she received because she was from a Muggle family – "You're wasting the valuable opportunities you have, Rose, and someday you'll regret it!" – how I have to live up to her and Daddy but won't because I'm lousy, stubborn, crass, immature, self-centered, lazy, dim...*

*I could cheerfully strangle her right now.*

**You poor child. Do tell me more.**

*Well, yesterday, Uncle Padfoot and I went riding on his motorbike – the one with all those cool flying charms, I love it, and he told me he'll teach me how to drive it when I turn thirteen – without telling Mum. Well, we were out for an hour or two – we only flew over Godric's Hallow and it was so cold I started crying, not because I wanted to go down but because it was just a reflex action or something, Uncle Padfoot told me – and then when we got back, Mum was out in the garden crying. Daddy told us she'd been standing out there for two hours when it was so cold, just wearing a jumper because she didn't want to go in. And then, when she saw us, she SHOOK me. HARD. And then, she saw Uncle Padfoot and screamed at him for about fifteen minutes. My God, it was EMBARRASSING – the neighbors all started coming out and looking at her.*

*And then, she told me I couldn't go riding with him anymore because I hadn't asked her permission first that day and I had her worried sick, etc. I wanted to slap her. I MIGHT have slapped her if Uncle Padfoot hadn't been there – he made funny faces and winked at me when she wasn't looking, he didn't mind her yelling at him because she used to yell so much at him when they were at school. I guess he's used to it by now. She's such a COW.*

**She must have been worried about you.**

*I'm twelve! I'm old enough to take care of myself, and besides Uncle Padfoot was there too. I'm not a little kid anymore, why won't she realize that? And she's so UNFAIR – why can't I go riding with him again? I WILL go riding again, just because she said I can't. I want her to worry and cry out in the cold until she gets frostbite and dies. And why did she have to cry? Daddy tried to make me feel guilty about her crying about me. Sweet Morgana, is it my fault if it's that time of month again?*

**No, of course, it isn't. How is your godfather?**

*He's fine. I caught him browsing over my Astronomy textbook the other day and he told me that his newest interest is star-gazing. His interests are always a bit weird.*

**But you find them endearing?**

*Well, the biology phase was fun... you should have seen the pictures in those books! I was nine and I was perfectly horrified... they're all really, really gross and stuff. Not pretty at all.*

**You see him everyday now, don't you?**

*He's been coming for dinner every night this last week. That's the only thing good about Mum – the way she cooks. Everything else is just... blegh. I asked him about Grandmother Dorea and he shrugged and said he'd heard rumors about that, but wasn't quite sure. I suggested he ask Mrs. Tonks because she knows a lot about her family history and stuff – she and Mrs. Malfoy still keep in contact, even though the Blacks were never comfortable with her marrying Mr. Tonks. He just laughed and said he would, but he hasn't yet. Maybe it's because the two of them don't really get along – of course, they're both 'renegades', but he says she's more of a rebel, the dark horse of the family, while he's the traitor, the black sheep.*

**And you have been enacting the role of the charming, little goddaughter successfully, haven't you?**

*I'm always charming. Except in Charms class.*

**No tinge of the Lolita in your attitude towards him?**

*Excuse me?*

**I think you know what I'm trying to imply.**

*I shall play dense. No, I really don't know – or care either – what you're trying to imply. I was bored that's why I opened you to write in, not to receive snide comments. I have Mum to turn to for that.*

**You play dense so prettily that it's almost a shame to have to remind you that you are no longer of an age to play naïve. It was diverting when you were a child, your little infatuation on your godfather I mean. But now you're growing up and being as tenacious as you are... he'll hate himself, when he understands that it's fast progressing into something larger than a little crush.**

**If he ever learns how you feel about him, he'll feel guilty, ashamed for leading you on. He's your father's friend for god's sake, twenty years older than you. Do you want to bind him down with your misplaced affections? Do you want to poison his life, his soul, to shatter him completely?**

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Her hair was a blackish whorl over the white carpet of snow, her eyes the brilliant green you associated with emeralds. She lay with her arms outstretched on the whiteness that seemed to blanket the whole world, snowflakes melting on her pale face, a light sheen of frost shimmering off her long, dark eyelashes.

"When I die," she murmured dreamily, frost burning like fire on her tongue, "I want to be embalmed. In a glass coffin – just like Snow White. It'll be in a garden and there'll be white flowers – not roses, I hate roses, not lilies either, they always make me think about funerals – in summer, snow in winter. And there'll be birds and butterflies, little kids too, playing around. I'll be an old lady with white hair but I won't ever decay or anything because I'll be embalmed. And then, maybe I'll come down and see my coffin sometimes, from heaven – because I'm not going to go to hell."

The crescent moon hung like a sliver of glass on one side of the lilac sky, on the other side, the sun descended in fiery, blazing glory. For some reason Rose wanted to cry, to rest in the cold, bracing snow that asked nothing of her, to rest forever until time and eternity were just words.

"Your mother wants me to tell you that you're going to catch your death of cold out here," a voice high above her said.

Rose squinted upwards, hating him at that moment, for shattering the moment, for bringing her back to reality again. She hated her mother too. "I don't care," she muttered, "I'm going to die someday, aren't I? It doesn't matter if it's now or ten years later or a hundred or..."

Sirius sat down beside her, crossing his long legs. "Why so gloomy? Don't tell me Lils said something to fire you off again."

“She’s a-” Rose began but stopped abruptly, remembering that she wasn’t at school.

“*L’chienne?*” Sirius asked, his eyes twinkling as he stroked her hair. “James used to think his mother was too, when he was twelve.”

“And you used to think yours was since you were three,” Rose muttered.

“Since I was capable of sentient thought, actually.” He looked thoughtful as he said suddenly, “what do you say, me and you go and have a ride on the motorbike, go to London, maybe buy a pair of stilettos – have you been wearing your old pair everywhere, like you said you would?”

“I’ve outgrown them,” Rose said shortly.

“Have you?” he chuckled, looking absurdly proud of her. “You’re going to be very tall one day – you’re five-four right now, aren’t you?”

“Four-and-a-quarter-of-an-inch,” Rose reminded him, “you forgot that.”

“I guess you’ll grow the last three-quarters-of-an-inch right during the vacations, and then I won’t need to remember how many fractions of an inch you are. So, what about my idea?”

“It’s too late,” she said. “Besides, Mum would probably have an aneurysm.” She was proud of herself for using that word – the Diary had told her what it meant and how to spell it.

“Expanded your vocabulary too, I see,” Sirius remarked. “Well, I guess you’re right about it being late anyway.” He stood up, “Don’t take too long, it’s pretty cold out here.” And then he was gone.

Rose closed her eyes, both wanting to and not wanting to call him back. The Diary’s words rang *clear and true* – *It was diverting when you were a child, your little infatuation on your godfather I mean. But now you’re growing up and being as tenacious as you are... he’ll hate himself, when he understands that it’s fast progressing into something larger than a little crush. If he ever learns how you feel*

*about him, he'll feel guilty, ashamed for leading you on. He's your father's friend for god's sake, twenty years older than you. Do you want to bind him down with your misplaced affections? Do you want to poison his life, his soul, to shatter him completely?*

It was for the best that they remain... distant. The Diary was right. It was always right.

"So our Ice Princess has finally come in," Lily remarked as Rose entered the dining room, her face flushed and blotchy from the cold. She handed Rose a plate heaped with food. "You look thin – I hope you haven't been starting a silly diet back at school."

"Rose – diet?" Sirius snorted, "she's the last person who'd ever dream of going on one."

Rose wrinkled her nose at the smell of the food. "What is this?" she demanded. "It smells off."

"Chicken," her mother said. "And it's definitely not off."

Rose took a seat at the table, next to her father. Harry's new cat crept stealthily across the floor and curled around the legs of her chair. For some reason, Rose didn't mind it – unlike her parents who seemed both mystified and a little frightened by it. Patting Debacle's golden fur, she began to eat her mashed potatoes.

"Remember to eat your proteins," Lily reminded her. "Proteins are good for your body and they're especially vital during puberty because..."

"You sound like a bio textbook," Rose muttered and was perversely pleased to see her mother scowl. Nevertheless, she did fork a piece of chicken – wrinkling her nose at the smell – and shovel it into her mouth. For a moment she chewed and then she knew something was off. Slamming her plate on the table, she bolted as fast as she could into the bathroom; vomit spewing down her mouth, dribbling down her chin, before she even reached. Undigested food trailed her, mostly on the carpet and the tiles, and just a bit on the sides of the pristine white basin. She retched and retched but not much came out, because she'd already finished throwing up along the way.

Tears gleamed in her eyes, tears of pain as her stomach heaved – pulling in and out, in and out, – so tightly she felt her ribs might crack. Someone was holding her head, someone was saying, “I had no idea”, a cat was purring, and Harry was squealing. It meant nothing to her, it was nothing compared to the emptiness in her clenching stomach, the leaden weakness that threatened to weigh her down, blurring the edges of her vision.

That was the last time in her life she ate chicken.

**000**

“Mum’s going to kill you.”

Rose pulled on her gloves and glared at her little brother, who was perched up on the stairs with his cat and the jar of cookies he’d stolen from the kitchen. Daddy was away at work and Mum was away for the afternoon running all the little errands that she’d been putting off – buying groceries and Christmas presents (it was a tradition with her to buy all her gifts a few days before Christmas), gift-wrapping them, paying bills, getting Snidget’s health-check up and vaccinations done at St. Bathilda’s, visiting acquaintances whom she didn’t like but had to visit at least twice a year, replenishing her store of potions...

Harry was supposed to be doing the work she’d assigned him – four pages in his Maths workbook – and Rose was supposed to be resting – “No buts about it, Missy! You need plenty of rest and healthy food!” – but today both felt particularly defiant. Rose was going to be running some errands of her own today, none of which Lily would have approved of. She’d be visiting her old Muggle teachers – aside from a few hurried ‘hellos’ and little comments like ‘lovely day, isn’t it?’ she hadn’t talked to them in two years and felt guilty –, going to the village library. She’d also decided that it was high time she helped Harry make another snowman – he was terrible at it.

“She’s going to say you’ve overexerted yourself,” Harry announced, stroking his cat. “You might even get grounded – *again*.”

Rose laughed. Even to her ears it was an ugly sound – colored by defiance and recklessness, it sounded false. She wasn’t going to the library because she wanted to borrow a book, she wasn’t going to



help Harry build a snowman because he couldn't do it properly – she was doing it in the hope that she'd catch a cold, fall sick and thus worry her mother.

“Who's going to tell her I haven't had my little nap?” she asked Harry. “What she doesn't know can't hurt her.” *I wish she knew. I wish it hurts her.*

Harry raised his eyes heavenward and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “*Teenagers.*”

As she clambered out of the house, the snow ankle-deep, she shivered. She'd been careful to put on several layers of clothing but still it was very cold. She thought about the distance between her house and the library and frowned. Well it would be a good opportunity to get sick if she went so far, but then again Christmas was on the way and she didn't want to be sick during their New Year's Party and well...

Of course Mum wasn't right that she needed rest. Mum was seldom ever right. All the same, she decided that she'd cut her trip short today. Not because of Mum or anything, just because it was cold. Of course.

**000**

“Deck the halls with boughs of holly, falala lalala. Tis the season to be jolly, falala falala lala...”

Laughing, their arms loaded with presents, Rose and Harry threw open the doors to their parents' bedroom, bright and early on Christmas morning. It was a family tradition for them – waking up at five or earlier, racing downstairs to check that Santa had finished the milk and cookies they'd set out the night before (Rose didn't have the heart to tell Harry that Santa Claus was actually James Potter, he'd learn that hard fact soon enough), and then bearing away the presents under the Christmas tree and on the doorstep – their friends' owls had sent them, the night before – to their parents. They'd sit all four of them, on the king-sized bed with its plummy mattress and fat pillows, snuggle under the eiderdown quilt and open presents,

scattering bits of velvet ribbon, wrapping paper eiderdown, and tinsel all over the room.

Today was no different.

Rose forgot her animosity towards her mother as she kissed her cheek and cried, "Merry Christmas!" Debacle padded from Harry's room and curled up on the blanket over his legs, as though he too was a part of the family and deserved recognition as such.

"A new dress... why do I need a new dress?" Rose moaned, tugging impatiently on the puffed-out, forest green sleeve that peeked out from a long, cream-colored box. "And what is this made of anyway?"

"Environmentally-friendly velvet, from Twilfitt and Tatting's, I made sure of that. You know how important it is for all of us to do our bit and chip in to protect the environment. And that's for our New Year's Day party," Lily reminded her. "Aside from your school uniform you don't have any skirts in your wardrobe, leave aside dresses..."

Rose made a face as Harry cried ecstatically, "A new chess set – woah, awesome! Thanks, Mummy, Dad."

"Pretty," Rose murmured, holding up Uncle Padfoot's gift – a delicate, silver charms bracelet with a tiny, lime-green snake pendent set on it already. She snapped the bracelet on her thin, white wrist, admiring the effect of the coiled, little serpent over her skin. "I'll have to buy more charms for this one."

Her father began to chuckle suddenly as he lifted a mango-colored box up and opened it a crack to show Lily what was inside. She gasped and blushed. "Looks like Sirius really is pretty concerned about the state of our marriage," James said dryly, closing the box and slipping it underneath a pillow.

"What did you get from Uncle Padfoot?" Harry demanded, putting down a box of Muggle candy from Aunt Petunia that he had begun to unwrap. He tried to lean forward and take out the present James had put underneath the pillow but Lily pushed him back firmly.

“Not for your eyes,” his father said, grinning. “All you need to know is that we’ll be using it pretty frequently.”

“*James*,” hissed Lily, looking scandalized. “Do you really want to scar our children for life?”

Rose made a mental note to ask Uncle Padfoot what he’d sent them – judging from their words and expressions it was probably very... interesting. In an adult way. “Pretty big this year,” she said thoughtfully, pulling out Neville’s present. “Funny, normally he tries to get away with giving me a box of Bertie’s Beans.” It was an almost-square package wrapped in thick, brown paper, big enough to cover her lap when she placed it there, and bound carefully with Spellotape. It looked plain enough – what was it? Together, she and Harry ripped the paper off. There seemed to be a wooden... square inside.

“Odd,” James said. “What do you think it is?”

Rose turned over the wooden square and then gasped. “Well,” she mumbled faintly as her parents stared, identical looks of approval and admiration plastered all over their faces, at Neville’s picture. “Well, I knew he was getting better at drawing and stuff but this...”

There was a central square frame, surrounded by six smaller wooden frames inside the larger square. Within the central square, he’d painted a picture of the three of them. It was a simple watercolor – Rose, her eyes done spectacularly in vivid green, was at the centre playing with a Snitch, Ron curled up beside her with a book, warm sunlight glistening off his bright red hair, and Neville on her other side, wearing his favorite indigo-blue cardigan, sketching.

It wasn’t perfect – the grass was too dark in some patches, too light in others, Ron’s legs were too long, Rose’s nose and eyebrows a little smudged, and Neville’s ears oddly shaped – but it was very, very beautiful in its own sweet, unpretentious way. It was crystal clear that the painter had obviously enjoyed himself while painting it, had known his subjects well – Rose felt almost as if it was her personality that was shining through from her picture. It was the love he’d put into the picture that made it so lovable.

On the six smaller wooden frames were black-and-white photographs he'd taken – inconsequential things at first glance, which later weren't so inconsequential. Rose's first broomstick, the tiny, toy one she'd rode when she was a year old. The chipped orange mug – the only utensil Ron had brought over from his parent's house to Aunt Muriel's. The tiny, silver spoon with a fish carved on its handle Neville had used when he was a toddler and that his father and grandfather had used before him. His favorite pencil – the purple one with the golden feather, which he used for sketching. Ron's favorite book – *Les Misérables*. Rose's old stilettos.

"I guess this is what you'd call poignant," Lily murmured, running a finger over the thin glass frame over the picture of Rose's baby broomstick. "If he ever turns to art as a professional career... well, all I can say is that he'll be good at it. Really, he's got a wonderful sense of... form, even though he's only twelve."

"It really is nice," Harry said earnestly. "Blimey, Rose you never told us that Neville was so good at this – it's just like what a real artist would do, isn't it, Dad?"

"I didn't... know," Rose said. The confession was wrung from her throat – it hurt, it humiliated her to know that she knew so little about what mattered most to her best friend. Was she even worthy to be called his best friend now? "He likes to talk to Colin more about his artsy stuff," she said defensively. "Colin Creevey – they like chit-chatting about Picasso and the Rococo Movement and stupid stuff like that when I'm too busy with Quidditch to talk to him."

"But you don't like to talk about Picasso at all," Harry reminded her, in the irritating way little brothers had of reminding their sisters about things they didn't want to be reminded of. "Neville and Colin like to talk about the same kind of stuff. You didn't tell us he had a new best friend."

"Because he *doesn't*," Rose said loudly, too loudly, as though she was trying to convince herself. "Ron and I are his only best friends – Draco and Colin mean nothing to him. They're just hangers-on, they don't care about him the way we do. They're just... fair-weather friends."

James raised his eyebrows but, thankfully, said nothing.

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*Dearest, Lovable-est Ravenclawey Friend of mine,*

*Thanks for the broom-servicing kit; it was really thoughtful of you! Cool isn't it how much money you have – though Muriel's put it into a recurring deposit scheme or something hasn't she? Daddy said something about it... but hey you still get more pocket-money than you used to, right? Speaking of your beautiful, sweet-tempered Auntie... how's life with the dragoness now? I bet you're still wishing you were at Hogwarts – Neville said his grandmother said she's positively senile nowadays.*

*I know what senile means, did you know? Yes, I know you're proud of me. I'm proud of me too.*

*Is Ginny ever going to cut her hair? She promised me she would once she was back home. It's annoying to the rest of us who don't have such bee-yoo-ti-ful hair to see her wandering around the halls of Hogwarts, lighting the whole place up with her long, shining, flame-hued waves of dancing hair. It makes us insecure about our hair and sometimes we want to try on hair-extensions or use potions/shampoos which actually utilize toxic ingredients in order to keep our hair supple and shiny...*

*Yeah, Mum gave me a lecture about the Tugwood Range of Beautifying Hair Potions – plus a blow-by-blow account of what exactly they put into those potions. You'd be surprised at the ingredients – they range from dog urine (for the potions to dye your hair blond) to uranium (I know, I know – WTF) to diluted Bubotuber pus. Good to know, isn't it? I told her in that case I wouldn't ever wash my hair again and then she said no, of course not, you can't do that blah blah...*

*Isn't that pretty hypocritical of her? L'chienne you might call her.*

*Too bad you can't come over for our New Year's Day party. Neville's coming – thank God he managed to skip out of the Grand Longbottom Reunion – and we're really going to miss you. Why can't*

*you ask Muriel again to let you come? Remember to tell Gin what I said about Hair Potions – and please beg her to chop off that hair, it's perfectly horrible for one person to have so much nice, pretty hair, it defies the laws of nature.*

XOXO

Rose

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"You look gorgeous." The confession was wrung – painfully – from Rose's throat. Too many things seemed to be wringing her throat painfully nowadays. She wished she could shut up and keep those words to herself, to spare herself the pain, but somehow she never could. It seemed too much like betraying herself if she didn't say them, too much like hiding from herself – something she was too proud to do.

"Thank you." Lily blushed with pleasure and twirled around, until she was facing Rose. She really did look beautiful on the night of the New Year's Party, ten years younger than her real age, more like a young girl than a mother of three. Her glossy, dark red hair flowed around her face, bedecked with a cluster of tuberose flowers over her left ear, adding warmth to her milky white skin. Her eyes were brilliant, sparkling with excitement, lighting up her delicately flowerlike face. Her dress was daringly short – so short that Rose felt a little uncomfortable, it really was odd to see her mother wearing something sexy – cinched tight around the curves of her petite frame. It was ivory-white silk with the Chinese characters for the word 'Happiness' etched in bold black strokes down the right side. Chunky black beads accentuated her glamorously protruding collarbones and, to complete the outfit, a pair of elegant, five-inch-high, black heels that Rose envied.

"You look beautiful too, yourself," Lily added, smiling and beckoning Rose over to the mirror.

"I look like a vampire," Rose muttered, ashamed to stand in front of the mirror beside her pretty mother. "I'll never be as hot as you."

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Lily said kindly, “You take after your father and isn’t he a handsome man?”

“Not as much as Uncle Padfoot,” Rose insisted.

“Well, we can’t all be Blacks,” Lily said vaguely, “They’re, all of them, exceptionally beautiful – Andromeda, Sirius, that Lestrangle woman, Mrs. Malfoy too, from what I’ve heard and seen in the magazines. Come here, darling, let me arrange your hair for you.”

“I’ve already brushed it,” Rose insisted, tugging at the eco-friendly material of her dark green top.

Lily raised an eyebrow and beckoned her over, “It’ll look nicer once I fix it up for you. Come on.”

Unwillingly, Rose went forward. She caught a glimpse of a sullen face with an unattractively square jaw and a decidedly strong, straight nose before her mother took out a comb and began brushing her hair. “Two boys and one girl, that’s what I’ve got,” Lily joked, “At least Snidget doesn’t mind the color pink – you did, you know, even when you were only two or three. You hated it.”

“Still do.”

*“Oh, right. You have this weird, unreasonable phobia of the color pink, don’t you?” Blaise grinned. “I think Pansy said that... not masculine enough for you, is it?”*

*“No,” Rose said, absently, watching Wood block Bell’s attempted goal narrowly. He had a nice smile, she decided. Not saccharinely sweet like a Hufflepuff, not smug like a Ravenclaw, or challenging like a Slytherin... just nice. “No, I hate pink.”*

*“Is it the color you hate, or its connotations?” Blaise asked softly, watching her eyes follow Wood. “Pink – associated in the modern age with femininity. Girly-ness. That’s why you hate it, don’t you?”*

“And a bit like this, and a bit like that... a fringe works very nicely I think, ah yes.” Lily sounded awfully like a hairdresser at a fancy, overpriced salon. “Oh my, I think this will do – now smile or it won’t

look so nice. No, not like that – you look like you’re being forced to smile, no, don’t answer that – a bit like... no, don’t pout, you look silly... a bit like... ah, hold it! Right there. Yes... now look at yourself.”

Rose looked. She saw the self-conscious, still childish-boned face of a twelve-year-old girl. A very *thin* girl, she was surprised to see. Maybe there was a grain of truth – howsoever small – behind her mother’s constant nitpicking about her weight. Odd, she ate so much – well, she didn’t think it too much but Blaise seemed to – and then, suddenly, she remembered the foul taste in her mouth that she woke up to so many mornings at Hogwarts, the sickly stench that seemed to hover over her pajamas, the little blots of food-colored stains that painted her robe anew every morning... was there something called sleep-vomiting, like sleepwalking? And then, there was all the running she did... twice a day, for nearly an hour, just to relieve her pent-up energy, which she would otherwise have relieved by playing Quidditch.

She ran a finger lightly over her sharp collarbones, exposed by the square collar of her forest-green blouse. Her legs, so long under her short, sandalwood-paste-colored, gauzy skirt, really did look very thin, and – now that she thought of it – she must have dropped a waist size because Mum had to cinch the skirt tighter so that she could fit into it...

“I really think this adds a nice touch,” Mum was saying thoughtfully, patting Uncle Padfoot’s charms bracelet. “We’ll get your ears pierced this summer, shall we? Then you’ll be able to try on some of my earrings – you used to love the big, dangling ones when you were little, you used to tug on them, and I used to get mad...” There was a wistful note on her voice as she gently squeezed Rose. “We used to be so close, darling, you told me everything you couldn’t to Daddy and Uncle Padfoot, didn’t you? And now...”

“I bet that’s called growing up,” Rose muttered, shying away from her mother’s touch. She fiddled with the hem of her skirt.

“True,” her mother said pensively. “I suppose that’s true – I didn’t have a mother to tell things to, when I was your age.”



Rose nodded, remembering that her Grandmother Iris had died of cancer when her mother was about thirteen. Somewhere down the doorbell rang, and Lily, after a quick glance at the mirror, said, “that must be Mary – she said she’d bring over Neville from Mrs. Longbottom’s place,” and hurried out. Rose tugged her black hair, soft and glossy after her recent shampoo, beyond her ears and trailed after her mother.

Aunt Mary, resplendent in a little black dress and a colorful, red silk scarf, had indeed arrived with her three young children – Ellie who was seven, Maisie who was six, and three-year-old Alfred –, her husband, Reginald, and Neville. “You look *lovely*,” Aunt Mary squealed in the annoyingly shrill tone godmothers tended to use whenever their goddaughters wore something they did not normally wear. Ellie and Maisie, who were both old enough to be interested in older girls wearing pretty dresses and makeup (even if just a little), regarded Rose with wide eyes and Mr. Cattermole beamed down at her. She blushed, hating the pale skin that always reddened when she was embarrassed, uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

“What do you think, Neville?” Mum asked, with twinkling eyes. “What do you think about your ugly duckling?”

*Cliché alert! Next we’re going to be talking about the bee-yoo-ti-ful swans and somebody is bound to point out that they’re the only monogamous animals in the animal kingdom (everyone forgets foxes) and they’ll be wondering who my soulmate is and I’ll be forced to go break a vase so everyone stops bothering... and then I’ll be grounded for a week. Oh joy.*

“I think that Zabini would stop saying you resemble a primarily male organism loaded with testosterone,” Neville said gravely. “I think that he might even have made a move on you, if he saw you like this.”

*And that only proves that I look female instead of pretty. Blaise would make a move on anything with a vagina.* “Thanks,” she mumbled, her faint hopes dashed.

Neville grinned and took her arm, leading her to the kitchen, while Lily took charge of the guests. Ellie began to look around for Harry on whom she had a crush, who had a crush on her little sister, Maisie. It

made for a charming love triangle. “You want to know what I seriously think?” he whispered conspiratorially.

“What?” Rose asked, hoping what he would say wouldn’t be too offensive.

“I think Zacharias Smith would forget that he hates your guts and start writing sappy, anonymous poems to you, if he saw you looking like this. You look terrific.”

Rose laughed and pinched his cheek fondly. “And that’s what best friends are for – ego-boosters. Flattery has a limit, Neville, and it’s not the sky. It’s not even the ceiling.”

“Well, maybe he wouldn’t write poems about how your eyes are the same color as fresh pickled toads,” Neville admitted. “But he’d certainly start stalking you in the corridors.”

Guests began trickling in. Fortified with a few glasses of lemonade, Rose and Neville stood in the hallway to open the door when the bell rang, to greet them and take their young children in hand. Her parents’ friends were all fairly young with very small children – the oldest was ten-year-old Romilda Vane, a snooty, stuck-up, little brat. Like her parents they were, all of them (except for Aunt Mary and Uncle Reginald), well-acquainted with Muggle fashion, with impressive positions (and paychecks) in the Ministry or prominent for being ‘rising stars’ in their respective fields.

The old adage about birds of a feather could not have been more apt for their clique. They weren’t exactly *friends* with each other, they were just friendly because they traveled in the same set, knew the same people... “It’s that sort of thing,” Mum had said vaguely when Rose had wondered aloud, when she was seven, why she bothered to go to their parties at all when she disliked a few of them so heartily. She hadn’t understood what it meant then, but now, she did. It was ‘that’ sort of thing just because if you didn’t put up with it, you wouldn’t go far in the adult world. The adult world, as Neville had sagely remarked when they were ten, was just a sham.

Mum and Aunt Mary, who always helped out because she and Mum had been best friends since they were fourteen, circulated among the

guests with trays of Muggle tequila, Butterbeer, and colorful cocktails with pretty paper umbrellas and cherries. Daddy and Uncle Padfoot made small talk about various subjects – careful not to introduce politics or the situation at Hogwarts at such an early stage, – snow, the dragon reserve at Romania someone had visited, chicken tikka masala... that sort of thing. Harry ushered all the children into his bedroom, while Rose and Neville – unwillingly – served them with lemonade, milkshakes, and chocolate-chip cookies.

“I just *loooooove* the way you’ve done your hair, Rose,” Mrs Vane, a tall, black-haired woman – who Uncle Padfoot had christened ‘The Succubus’ years ago – drawled in a false French accent. “It makes you look so... *raffiné*,” she finished, playing with the strand of pink pearls that glistened at her creamy white throat.

*And that pink dress makes you look like an oversized pig,* Rose thought disgustedly, but forced a polite smile and answered her demurely.

Daddy had brought the television into Harry’s room in the morning and after Rose was sure no more guests would arrive she set up the new Muggle movie, *Aladdin*, for the children to watch. It was her mother’s idea actually – the children would be quiet for ninety minutes because none of them had seen the movie, and while watching it they wouldn’t have time to mess up the room or break anything valuable running around the house playing games. In some ways, Lily really was a genius.

As soon as the opening credits had begun, Rose and Neville tiptoed out of the bedroom, relieved of their duties. They went over to Snidget’s room where she was curled up, blissfully asleep, under her pink blanket in the bassinet. Neville sat down cross-legged on the floor, while Rose settled down on the window seat. “I hate children,” she said bitterly, mopping her sweaty brow. “They’re so *aggravating* – can’t they do as they’re told for once in their life, instead of stopping to whine or argue every two seconds?”

Neville chuckled. “We were like that.”

Rose wrapped her arms around her legs, choosing not to reply. “It was really lovely – your picture, I mean. Even Mum and Daddy said it was fantastic.”

Neville’s ears turned red in embarrassment. “Good to know,” he muttered.

“Did you give one like that to Ron?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t have time – I was working on your gift from late October. Took me a lot of time to think about how I wanted it to be like – I couldn’t make up my mind, see. And even when I’d pictured it in my mind, I still couldn’t draw it... I wanted it to be just *perfect*, went through about twenty drafts trying to make it as nice as possible. Colin helped a lot.”

“Genius is ten-percent inspiration, ninety-percent perspiration,” Rose grinned. “It was perfect – I never knew you were so good. You really should think about taking up art as a professional career – well, that’s what Mum said at least, and you know how hard it is to please *her*.” There was a note of bitterness in her voice, as she nodded, “I never manage to.”

“Nice bracelet,” Neville said pointing at the silver charms bracelet dangling around her wrist. “Who gave it to you?”

“Padfoot,” Rose chuckled, remembering what he’d gifted to her parents. “Guess what he gave Mum and Daddy – mango-flavored edible lingerie, reusable mango-scented condoms, a mango-shaped vibrator, and a pocket-book edition of *The Kamasutra*.”

Neville chortled, “No way! Really? What did your Mum say?”

“Uncle Padfoot told me that she told him he was an adorable scoundrel and she wasn’t sure whether she should slap him or kiss him.”

“Sounds like she’s pretty happy with what she got,” Neville said laconically.

“Do not defile this child’s nursery with your crudities,” Rose said sternly. Then she laughed and added, “I saw *The Kamasutra*’s already dog-eared, they’ve been reading it so much.” She stretched her legs, fidgeting. She hadn’t run today – she’d been too busy in the morning, cleaning her room, decorating her room, tasting Mum’s cooking to make sure it was perfect (it always was) – and her legs felt restless. It was odd how her legs seemed to have a life of their own, dictating her mood by how *they* felt. And it was doubly odd how she couldn’t go a day without running. Even when she was supposed to be tired, even when her muscles ached and her head buzzed, she didn’t feel like her day was complete without having gone for her daily run.

“Want to go outside?” Neville suggested, reading her mood.

Rose nodded eagerly and stood up. Arm in arm, the two climbed down the staircase and out into the hall. While Rose was putting on the black leather jacket Uncle Padfoot had given her on her birthday, Neville said a little uncertainly, “shouldn’t we ask your Mum for permission?”

She glanced across the hall, at the living room she could just see, bright with light, soft chatter, and laughter. Her lips tightened, and for a moment, in spite of the black hair, the square jaw, and strong nose, she looked strikingly like her mother. “No,” she said curtly, “no – let her worry about me if she likes. I’m not a baby anymore, I don’t need to tell her where I am every second of the day – I mean, we’ll only be in the village, right?”

Neville nodded and opened the door, frosty air blowing in and chilling her. The last night of the year promised to be a cold one. “Let’s go to the graveyard, shall we? It’ll be nice and quiet down there – and I have something to show you too.” There was a mixture of enthusiasm and nervousness in his face that intrigued Rose. Buttoning her jacket, she followed him outside, leading him down the cold lane. Lights blossomed in some windows, golden shafts dancing on the pure, untouched snow outside. Snowmen bedecked with colorful scarves and earmuffs, with tomatoes and carrots for noses, a sheen of frost glistening over their stick-arms, stood cheerfully on some lawns. Two teenagers made out on a corner, under a street lamp.

The church was dark, the graveyard even more so. It was eight-thirty. Lily would have dinner piping hot for the children at nine-thirty – after the movie was finished. The adults would eat later, around eleven. To an outsider, the cemetery would have looked sinister and foreboding, to Rose, who had grown up in Godric's Hollow, it was almost like an extension of her home. It had snowed earlier and now the graves and tombstones were white, under their burden of snow. Neville dusted the snow off lightly from a particularly broad grave and sat down. Rose perched beside him, swinging her legs. A cold wind nipped around her ankles, stinging her cheeks like a slap.

She wanted to do something dramatic, something to inscribe this night into her memory forever. It was special, it deserved to be remembered years later, when she was old and grey...

Neville was fishing around for something in his pocket. "Here," he said, handing her his wand. Wondering about what he was going to do, Rose took it. "Mmm... ah-huh. Here it is." It was too dark to make it out clearly, but it seemed like Neville was holding a small box in his hand. He sounded excited. "First of all, you have to promise me you won't tell anyone about this – no, not even Ron. I don't think he'd... approve."

"What's that?" Rose asked, very interested now. "And why wouldn't Ron approve?"

"Because he's Ron," Neville said matter-of-factly. "Quintessential, know-it-all, older-than-his-years Ravenclaw. But you, my friend... are a Slytherin." He paused dramatically. "Open to experimentation, inquisitive, thirsting for knowledge..."

"Um," Rose said slowly, "that's what a Ravenclaw is supposed to be – not a Slytherin."

He waved his hand impatiently. "Whatever. Pull out one for yourself." He handed her the small box, and Rose took it. Sliding it open, she picked up one of the small, white, cylindrical, paper-like things inside and felt it.

"It's a cigarette," she said slowly, very slowly. Then, "Neville have you lost your mind?"

“Blaise gave each of us a pack last month,” he said, sounding both scared and defiant. “I...”

“You’ve *smoked*?” Rose knew she was supposed to sound morally indignant and self-righteous, but all she felt was angry that he hadn’t told her, that he’d done something so grown-upish before her. Not fair.

“No!” Neville said. “I told him he was an asshole and I put it away, but I...”

“Quite understandable. No, not really – you smoked without telling me! Neville, how could you?”

“I *didn’t*,” Neville said, sounding a little annoyed now. “I’ve never, never I repeat, smoked. I swear, hand over heart, hope to die if I lie, I swear on this gravestone, I swear on...”

“Fine, fine,” Rose said. “So – you haven’t smoked?”

“No.”

“But you meant to, tonight?”

“Well...”

“And you do know about lung cancer, carbon monoxide poisoning, nicotine addiction, and all the other things that go hand in hand with smoking?”

“Your Mum’s told me that often enough.”

“But you still wanted to smoke?”

“Sort of... well, yeah. I’m just... curious. Aren’t you?”

*No, Rose thought indignantly, No, of course, I’m not. I’m a fine, upstanding, moral, young citizen and I do not wish to tarnish my fine, upstanding, moral image with such depraved activities as smoking. Of course, I’m not interested, no, not in the least little bit. It doesn’t sound exciting or anything. Smoking is*

BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAD. But when she opened her lips, all she could say was, "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Blaise started this summer," Neville was almost whining, "Over man-to-man chats with his stepfather."

"Draco?" Rose couldn't help asking.

"Draco was as appalled as I pretended to be," Neville sighed. "Only I think, well... he really was appalled."

"And you were pretending?"

"Not exactly, but I can't deny that I was..."

"Fascinated?"

"You know me better than I do myself."

Rose kept quiet, crossing and uncrossing her legs restlessly. She rolled the cigarette over her fingers and wondered how such a little thing could cause so much damage. "Just once," she said quickly. "This is the first and last time – just this once so that we know how it feels. Promise?"

"Yes."

"Hold my hand and say it."

He reached forward and took her hand. "You're freezing," he said.

"So are you. Now promise."

He promised and took his wand from her hand. "You first," he said eagerly. Then, wryly, "You do know how to do it, don't you?"

"Of course," Rose said indignantly. "Uncle Padfoot used to do it all the time – that was before I made him quit when we were seven, remember?" Nervously, she put the cigarette in her mouth. It felt awkward and she was tempted to giggle at the sight she knew they must have made – two twelve-year-olds in a graveyard on the last night of 1992, learning how to smoke. He leaned forward and pressed



the tip of his wand to the end of the cigarette. Rose vaguely wondered what brand it was. She sucked in too quickly and then began to cough, pulling the cigarette out of her mouth. "Jesus Christ," she muttered, shaking it slightly, "I feel ridiculous."

"You look ridiculous too."

She put it back in her mouth and inhaled. "Try it," she told him, "if I'm doing it, you have to."

She lit his cigarette for him and was gratified to see that he too was as awkward as her. It was funny, and then, in a way, it wasn't. She was old enough to absorb how pathetic they must seem – two *children* smoking. On the night of New Year's Eve. In a cemetery. Could life get any more depressing?

Snowflakes began to fall, lighting softly on their bare heads, shining for a moment on their shoulders before they melted away. Rose threw the cigarette on the ground and stamped on it with her heel until it went out. Neville followed her example, looking a little relieved actually. "This is the last time we do this," he reminded her as they jumped over the graveyard fence and left.

"Of course," she said. "We promised."

"Like we ever keep our promises if they prove to be too inconvenient," Neville snorted. Rose opened her mouth to protest but laughed. He was right about that.

"Well, this one shouldn't be inconvenient," Rose said firmly, opening the door of her house and slipping in. "Smoking is bad. Repeat after me." Neville chortled and swatted playfully at her head.

Most of the adults had wandered outside into the lawn, to smoke. Aunt Mary was singing something in her low, lovely, exquisitely modulated voice. A few words floated on the chilly breeze to Rose's ears, "*You're the rose in the snow... hiding your thorns... with all your beauty... I ignored caution... from everybody... an aching heart... in a tale of woe... blood dripping from a finger... from the rose in the snow.*"

For one heart-stopping moment it meant something to her as she remembered a word called 'epiphany' which had caught her eye last summer while she'd been browsing, bored, through the dictionary. And then Neville was tapping her arm and suggesting they could go put on *Bambi* – his favorite movie – after the kids had finished watching *Aladdin* and the moment was lost.

**A/N: To anyone who's reading this and is twelve years old... smoking is baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaad. In no way am I encouraging it.**

**Ahoyhoy: Yeah I think I have a serious problem... I can't help changing their genders. It's so fun. The Cellist of Sarajevo? Is it nice? Btw, wats ur new username account? Then I can just PM you with the – more detailed – review responses.**

## ***Back to School***

*"I promise never to stop loving you, no matter what happens," she whispered, her whole soul in her words. "I'd die for you, Neville, really I would." Neville grabbed her wrist, pulling her towards him, his other hand clutching his wand tightly. The tips of their wands touched, and sparks – flame-red from hers, blazing-white from his – danced at the point of contact.*

*"I'd take an Avada Kedavra for you," she whispered to him, earnestly, without thinking about what she was saying, her voice a pledge, an unbreakable vow.*

*"And I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt you," Neville whispered, caught up in the intensity of the moment, his voice as passionate as hers. Theatrics had always appealed to him. "I'll always take care of you, I promise, Rose."*

## **Ch 7**

Uncle Padfoot had warned her about what to expect. She'd read about them in colorfully-illustrated books, discussed and drawn them with Neville and Ron when she was a little girl. More recently she'd seen them soaring languidly high above the battlements of Hogwarts, in the grainy black-and-white photographs on the first page of *The Daily Prophet* – Neville's eyes had shone when he'd seen the picture and he'd said he couldn't wait to get back to school and take better, *colored* pictures of them with Colin. She'd expected to be a little nervous, maybe a bit scared – just a little, only the first time – when she actually saw them at Hogwarts, yes, but nothing – not knowledge, not courage, not even Neville shivering next to her in terror – could have prepared her for the sight of the Perytons that bitterly cold January twilight.

The horseless carriages drove between two, almost unnaturally straight, seemingly unending columns of the beasts – *beasts*, she decided, quivering as she caught the eye of one of them, too petrified, too magnetized to draw her gaze away from them. They were not hideous nor did they shimmer in the fading light with unearthly beauty. The stench of blood did not rise to her nostrils as her carriage drove through the line, nor did she feel the rushing chill one associated with

Dementors, a frightening, sometimes overpowering chill, yes, but one that could be actively *combated*. They did not assault any of her five senses with beauty, standing so still in the twilight, or repulse the hidden, deeper senses.

What then, she wondered, was just so nerve-wracking about them? Unicorns and dragons, Veelas and Dementors – you knew what to expect with those. To be elated or terrified, as the case might be. She felt neither, she realized belatedly, when the line of Perytons had ended, when she was far from the grasp of their unfathomable power. There was a word for what she felt, a word just on the tip of her tongue, she wished she could say it because words were magic and magic was power and if you knew the right word you could... well, you could do just about anything, she supposed. If you only knew the right word.

“Melancholy,” she heard Neville whisper hoarsely and suddenly she wondered whether they were soulmates. It was just the word she’d wanted, so perfect that he was either a Legilimens – highly doubtful – or they were more than just best friends.

*Born of darkness struggles to remain a light,  
As the Peryton screams it's piercing war cry  
- And ascends into the night.  
The soul awaits its judgment,  
Clinging on to what it can,  
Silhouetted against the full moon,  
The shadow of a broken man.*

*The Peryton wails into the night,  
As it skims across the icy sea,  
The most beautiful suicide,  
The life cycle complete.*

*And there it is, the picture behind the final curtain,  
That appears only when you stare into the eyes of mortality,  
The Peryton, your hope, your light, your dark  
Your journey, your beginning, on which now you must embark.*

It was an old poem, nearly as old as the legend of the Perytons themselves. *They came from the gold-and-emerald isles of Atlantis,*

*their wings glimmering like those of dragonflies – only much larger of course, no, not as big as a house, I'd say their wings were as long as you are now, Rosie, – over the silken blue waves.* Uncle Peter had told her the story many times over when she was small. His stories had always been so beautiful, she remembered, not as interesting or gory as Uncle Padfoot's, or as funny as Uncle Moony's, but *beautiful*. Beautiful not in the way of firelight dancing over warm, well-known old faces, but beautiful in the way a crescent moon might hang like a sliver of glass in a lilac sky, a beauty that would always remain aloof from you, would never be a part of you...

*The crescent moon hung like a sliver of glass on one side of the lilac sky, on the other side, the sun descended in fiery, blazing glory. For some reason Rose wanted to cry, to rest in the cold, bracing snow that asked nothing of her, to rest forever until time and eternity were just words.*

She wanted to rest and think quietly, about long-forgotten things, some of which she preferred to think, some of which she did not. To Neville's word, to Melancholy, she wanted to add another word – Bittersweet. Like coffee without enough sugar or a bar of dark hazelnut chocolate. You didn't like it enough to get another bar, but you liked it enough to finish the whole thing.

Neville was the first to clamber out of the coach and there was a curious expression on his face, one that Rose couldn't decipher. Ron looked very subdued and, unless she was mistaken, there was a tear rolling down his cheek. She looked away from him, not wanting him to notice that she'd seen him cry. "Well," Neville said thoughtfully, "I think we should go see your Uncle Moony sometime soon, don't you think? Learn a few tips about those... beasts." He said the word in the same way Rose thought of it, whilst referring to the Perytons in her mind – with repugnance. There was just something so *wrong* about those creatures, she could never think of them otherwise.

"Why would we need tips?" Ron sniffled. Sniffled, not said. Rose wondered why he was crying.

Neville swung an arm around Ron's shoulder and said, in the kindest tone that Rose had heard him use in a long time – certainly kinder,

less devoid of a subtle hint of patronization than he'd used with her for a long time – “Brace up, Ron. I know what you were thinking about... I want to know just why you were thinking about it now.” He looked up at Rose sharply. “You too – you were thinking about... hazelnut chocolate and Uncle Peter’s stories, right?”

Rose almost reeled back. Neville usually knew what she was thinking about – but in such detail? “Since when did you take up Legilimency?”

There was a very sly look on his face, an almost snakish look she thought suddenly, and vividly her mind flashed back, for a moment, to a stone faucet, carved like a stone serpent with jewel-bright green eyes, cast into sharp relief by an iron flambeaux on a moldering stone wall...

Neville’s eyes had narrowed dangerously. “What was that?” he demanded harshly. He leaned forward and gripped her shoulder, his eyes wild. “That snake – where did you see it?”

“What?” she asked dazedly.

Neville pulled his arm off Ron’s shoulder and actually shook her. “The snake, damn you! Where did you last see it? Why did you see it? Why were you with it?” His face had practically transformed, it was now so ferocious that Ron had stepped forward and was trying to put a placating arm over Neville’s shoulder, to lead him away. Neville flung off Ron’s arm violently, and grabbed Rose’s wrists so hard she could feel his fingers on her bones, through the thin skin of her wrists. She tried to say something, to tell him he was hurting her, but he wouldn’t let her. “Are you going to tell me or not? Are you?”

This was going too far, she understood. It was spiraling out of control and if she didn’t take control soon, she wouldn’t be able to take charge. Neville had always been her weak point; sometimes, she let him domineer over her beyond the point where she allowed others to. But there were limits and if she didn’t set those limits, who would? Certainly not him.

Swiftly, she drew her leg back and kicked him hard in the stomach. Before he could fall over into the snow, she’d already caught his arm,

holding him upright. "Don't push me too far," she said coolly. "Consider this your first and last warning." In a sudden motion, she jerked his arm out of hers and let him fall into the snow. And suddenly, she remembered how long she'd gone without actively, physically fighting with someone – almost too long. She'd been so good at it too, so strong, so swift... she missed Smith for that reason if for no other. It might be fun to kick his poncey ass.

Neville stood up slowly, massaging his stomach. He gave her the finger and grinned when Ron looked mildly scandalous. "You're just like Draco," he pointed out to Ron, "You should see the way his eyes get all big and scared when Blaise starts to talk... he's just a little mamma's boy." He turned to Rose and gave her an awkward, appeasing smile. "Sorry."

Rose swept up the marble steps of the castle without glancing back, the wind whipping her hair around her face. Neville caught up with her by the time she'd reached the Great Hall. "If you must know," he said in a low voice as she began chopping up her bread roll viciously, "The last time I saw that design was in a book Quirrell showed me just a few days before... well, you know. It was a common leitmotif in the book – I'll give you three guesses what it was about – but right on the last page someone had drawn the snake and signed his name."

Rose dropped her knife. She didn't bother to pick it up though as she turned to Neville. "You-Know-Who? Oh Neville, I'm so sorry I overreacted, I just had no idea..."

"Guess I overreacted too," he muttered, bending down to pick up her knife. He cleaned it on his shirt and handed it back to her. "The thing is... well, that's the first time I remembered that book. That's why I want to know more about the Perytons – what sort of power do they have? They might not be directly harmful to us, but it's always best to know as much as you can about everything that's around. Surprises aren't good."

"Don't say that," she said, thinking about Christmas presents. She lightly touched her charms bracelet, which she hadn't taken off since she'd begun to wear it. "Don't ever say things like that. It's just... blasphemy. Would you like to live in a world without surprises?"

He looked directly at her, a shrewd, calculating gaze so devoid of innocence, so mature that for a moment, it seemed to chill her to the bone. "In all honesty, Rose, I'd rather live in a world without surprises than die because there were too many of them and I wasn't prepared."

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"I think you've caught the essence of the thing, Rose. Bittersweet – yes, that's right."

Uncle Moony paused to take a sip from his cup and smiled genially at the three faces before him. "There's no need to look so worried, Neville – they're nothing to be scared of."

"Oh yes, they are," Ron said darkly. He'd been reading up about Perytons in the library and had discovered several interesting – or disgusting, if you looked at it that way – facts about them. "Perytons used to eat up people on ships, they used to rip them apart, and then wallow in their blood. And they also used to..."

Uncle Moony winced and held up his hand in protest. "Spare me the gory descriptions. Yes, Ron, that is certainly true – but remember, that's only for unblooded Perytons. The ones at Hogwarts, I assure you, are all blooded." Now Rose winced, wondering exactly how they'd become 'blooded'. It didn't sound pleasant. "In the olden days," Uncle Moony continued, "I mean, during the time of the Roman Empire, they were used for the execution of political prisoners – the condemned would be locked, with a small sword in a cage with an unblooded, ravenous Peryton. If he were able to slay the beast, he would be released. Naturally, a man – not even one with a sword, and most political prisoners were hardly great swordsmen to begin with; corpulent, self-satisfied senators, most of them – stood no chance. Unblooded Perytons are peaceful herbivores."

"Then why is Hogwarts being guarded by fifty peaceful herbivores?" Neville demanded. "I mean they're pretty and everything, but then they're not exactly useful, are they?"

"I forgot to mention the part about their incredible aptitude for discerning threats – and dealing with them, in the way they deem fit –,



once they have been adequately trained to recognize them. Have you noticed those talons? One swift gash and they'll be holding your heart. One strike from those antlers and you'll be paralyzed for life. Our Perytons have been highly-trained; battle-ready in short. Hagrid is quite brilliant with them – I wish I had half his skill with animals.”

“When you say ‘as they deem fit’,” Ron said carefully, “are you trying to say that they’re smart enough to...”

“They are not the savage beasts you three seem determined to consider them as,” Uncle Moony smiled pleasantly. “I would have explained in greater detail about the Rolvsson System of Classification of Magical Intelligence, but it’s a highly advanced theory that only N.E.W.T level students in my classes study. Suffice to say, they are as sharp in their way as a... dragon might be in its way. And dragons, though their image has been greatly sullied in Western mythology and literature, are not creatures whose intelligence should be scoffed at.”

Rose tried to picture an ‘intelligent’ dragon – all she could think about was one in a black velvet gown with gold-rimmed spectacles reading a book in a cozy cave.

Uncle Moony began again. “We’ve strayed far from the topic at hand, haven’t we? You wanted to know why exactly you felt so...”

“Bittersweet-esque,” Rose said quickly.

He smiled. “Yes, that’s right. Let me give you a hint – Peryton blood is used in the creation of high-quality Rememberballs.”

Neville was the first to grasp the implications. “When you’re near them they make you remember things? That’s it?” He sounded disappointed. “I thought it’d be something like you know, what Dementors do – Ron was crying.”

“I was not!” Ron protested loudly. “I just had something in my eye, that’s all.”

It was everyone’s standard excuse and today, even Uncle Moony rolled his eyes, muttering, “Some originality, my children.”

“But why do they make you remember things?” Neville demanded. “That’s not a survival weapon, that won’t help them get food or make more babies or...”

“Why are Veela as breathtakingly lovely as they are? Why are house-elves driven by the urge to serve?” Uncle Moony asked gently. “What prompts the ferocity of a dragon? There are answers to these questions, Neville – yes, I’m sure you might be able to find them in the library, Ron, but it’ll probably take several years of careful searching for the right books – but, forgive me if I sound harsh, those answers are currently beyond your comprehension.” He smiled wanly, as though to soften the sting of his words. “Many of them are beyond me as well.”

“But you’re a Care of Magical Creatures professor!” Neville protested. “You’re the best – you’ve written so many books!”

Uncle Moony stood up, a troubled look on his face. Walking around the circular table they’d all been sitting at, he went over to Neville and squeezed his shoulder gently. “There will come a time, Neville,” he said patiently, “when books and people – even those who are supposed to be the best, and I doubt I am one of them, though the compliment was kind – will be of no use. There will always be questions and to answer them will always bring up more questions. That is life.”

Neville chewed on his lip thoughtfully. “I don’t get it,” he said, rubbing his head. “I just don’t get it.”

“Sometimes,” Uncle Moony answered, “I don’t get it either. Those aren’t my words.”

“Whose are they?”

Uncle Moony was now grinning. “The Dalai Lama’s. I saw him when I was researching the Yeti in Tibet. A charming man, a sorcerer in the purest sense.”

“The Dalai Lama is a *wizard*?” Rose asked, shocked. “Woah...”

“A wizard is one who has acquired magical skills after years of training under professionals,” Uncle Moony explained. “A sorcerer, though, is one who has never received training – and when I mean magic, Rose, I don’t mean the feeble, trite, little one we teach you children at Hogwarts, the one with the wands.”

**000**

*January 17*

*A sorcerer though is one who has never received training – and when I mean magic, Rose, I don’t mean the feeble, trite, little things we teach you children at Hogwarts, the one with the wands. That’s exactly what he said, word for word. Explain please.*

**Why should I? I’m tired.**

*Explain. Now.*

**Goodness gracious, we’re rude tonight, aren’t we? To quote his words back at you, my dear young lady, these things are beyond your comprehension.**

*If you explained them to me, they wouldn’t be!*

**He meant the unfeeble, untrite, big things of life. Satisfied?**

*Can’t you give me a straight answer?*

**The opposite of straight is commonly held to be...**

*OK. I thought your last owner lived in the 40s or something? They didn’t have gay people then!*

**Kindly refine your language. Homosexuality was prevalent even in Classical Greece, thousands of years ago. It is not as recent a phenomenon as you erroneously hold it to be.**

*Well, I’ve never heard about gay people in the 40s.*

**Quite naturally. You lead a cosseted existence.**

*You're meaaaaaaaaan. Explain now.*

**Not without the magic word.**

*We're quite cheerful today, aren't we?*

**The bracing air of the Scottish highlands does my health good.  
Now, about that little magic word...**

*Alright. Please.*

**Please what?**

*Explain. Please.*

**He meant that the Dalai Lama is a paragon of the virtues that  
reek of the milk of human kindness.**

*What?*

**I knew you wouldn't understand. Mr. Lupin thinks the Dalai Lama  
is a kindhearted, compassionate, and pleasant individual.**

*... What about the part about 'magic'?*

**Your dear, misguided uncle considers those qualities to be the  
equal of magic. Excuse me while I throw up in disgust.**

*You poor dear. Want me to get you a glass of water?*

**I prefer champagne – how many times must I tell you so? Are  
you very tired right now? There's something I need you to do for  
me.**

*Sure. What?*

**I want you to post a letter to The Daily Prophet – a letter that is  
to appear in the Classifieds on the day Crouch's ministry falls.**

*...What?*

**Yes. Naturally you will have to pay the paper a substantial amount of money to have it published on the very day his ministry falls... now, lets see. Gilderoy Lockhart seems simple enough. He'll probably have *Alohomora*-proof locks in place in his office, so you will have to use *Flagrantia* – clumsy job, of course, but it'll have to do for now. I think we shall need about... fifty Galleons would do the trick, don't you think? He won't even miss the money. Remind me to teach you a few better spells later. Take your Map with you, perform a Disillusionment Charm on yourself – dear me, how troublesome, I'll have to take over this enterprise by myself I see, after all...**

...

...

...

*Yes, my lord?*

**You will write – make sure to disguise your handwriting, it's always best to take precautions – *Even the seven stars of the Pleiades must bow, when Orion's shoulder shines so brightly.* That will be all.**

**000**

To the untrained eye, with the exception of the introduction of the Perytons, Hogwarts was the same. Of course, there was a new librarian – a timid, old man, who always wore saffron robes and a rosary and had taken a vow of silence twenty years ago – and a new caretaker – a hatchet-faced woman, who seemed to consider it her duty to bemoan everything that was wrong with the world, from starving children in sub-Saharan Africa to the 'loose morals' of the younger generation ("*Harlot! Cytheran! Scarlet woman!*" she would scream if she saw a girl and boy so much as holding hands) – but apart from those additions, life was fairly normal. No one in their right senses wanted to visit the Perytons. Seeing as there were lots of people not in their right senses at Hogwarts, there were still, however, plenty of visitors for the Perytons.

People like Rose and Neville and Blaise, absorbed chiefly in only those things that affected them directly, wrapped up in controlling and directing their lives (and those of other people too), had no time to notice the little things. They did not connect with the structure and the spirit, the cadence of the slowly thumping heartbeat of the castle and the imperceptible melody of whispering stone and creaking wood. They were there for the people.

It came as an intoxicating rush of power for Rose – boosting the self-esteem, which had begun to dwindle since autumn when she'd understood her hitherto almost-limitless control over Neville was waning – once she realized all she had to do to get the best armchair by the fire was to lean over the third-year ensconced so comfortably in it, stroke his arm softly, and coo, “Don't be so *meaaaaan*.”

But for those who had come, over the course of time, to regard the castle not as a building, but as an extension of their self – for people like Zacharias to who Hogwarts was dearer and more precious than his uncle's home, which accepted him as he was and didn't want him to change – there was a difference between the languorous stone castle of old and the new fortress it had become. Rose roared with laughter when she saw him walking slowly down a deserted corridor on the first day, pressing his hands to the wall, a worried look on his face, but for once he ignored her. She would never see what he saw because she didn't care enough to. Her heart was bound to other, breathing hearts, and the invisible heart, hidden under layers of stone and wood, that was so much to him, was nothing to her.

Chinks and cracks had been sealed up, disused rooms locked with anti-*Alohomora* charms, secret passageways blocked, corridors seldom used guarded by enchanted, axe-wielding suits of armor, and worst of all, for the students, the kitchens placed under round-the-clock surveillance by a pair of highly-trained Ministry trolls. No one wanted a repeat of the St. Bathilda incident.

Zacharias knew it was necessary but that didn't mean he had to like it. Really, at the rate life was going – with Oliver's strenuous Quidditch sessions on one side and the inadequate meals served thrice a day on the other – he would probably die of starvation before he turned fourteen in November.

A curfew had also been established – to the dismay of every student from fourth year upwards who wanted a quiet place to shag – and the Astronomy Tower, former hotspot of virgins-who-didn't-want-to-be, was officially off-limits unless one was accompanied by one of the professors. Of course, there were several raised eyebrows at this declaration and before the week was out there as another declaration warning students on asking for permission to visit the Astronomy Tower at midnight with one of the professors, on penalty of five months of detention. Professor Sinistra was decidedly not amused at the number of eager pupils who wanted to have a look at Uranus with her at two in the morning.

And so, a month went by, peacefully and uneventfully enough, until the fine, sunny morning when Algernon Crouch was born, catalyzing a series of events that changed the political scenario of the magical community of Britain.

**000**

There'd been plenty of pressure on Bartemius Crouch to resign, ever since the 'December Crises' as everyone was calling the incidents at Hogwarts and St. Bathilda's, and even before that he'd been on shaky ground, ever since the finger of suspicion had been pointed at his wayward son. With the loss of his wife and daughter-in-law, his youth, attention to social niceties, he'd lost much of his photogenic appeal. Wizards in general were a fickle race, the vast majority uninterested in politics as long as it didn't affect them. The old glory days of Crouch had been forgotten long since and now it was time for a new, preferably more camera-friendly (or at least *interesting*, the only thing interesting about Crouch was his son), Minister.

On the last day of January, Philippa Crouch had her son, and the next day little Algernon's grandfather quietly resigned. Within hours of his resignation, the Heads of the various Departments of the Ministry had assembled together and elected Rufus Scrimgeour. There were several promotions that evening – and among them James Potter, once the Ministry's golden poster boy, now its most popular rising star, was made Head of the Aurors Department, at thirty-two.

In the wizarding world, where looks were everything and qualifications to governing bodies unimportant, James was eminently suitable as Head. He was young, boyishly charming, sociable, had a cute, photogenic, little family (with a Look-I'm-not-Racist-like-*those*-families tag in the form of a Muggleborn wife), and came from a well-known bloodline – what was not to like? Bravery, intelligence, dedication, and skill at managing people... those were only secondary.

Rose had grown up vaguely knowing all this, but still, it came as a shock when her mother sent her *Witch Weekly*, a few days later, with a letter telling her not to worry, that everything Skeeter had written was true but highly colored, not to mind the jeers some of her classmates might aim at her because of her father (“And don’t ever lose your trust in your father, because of something that dolled-up dung beetle wrote about him!”)...

By the time Rose had finished reading Lily’s long letter, Neville had already opened the magazine to a page with the headline *His Princess – Revealed: The True Story behind Rufus Scrimgeour and Dorea Black! Just why is Scrimgeour so ‘fond’ of James Potter?*

There was a black-and-white picture beneath the headline, a picture Rose had seen in the family albums. A lovely woman in her mid-twenties, looking very mod in a flouncy skirt that must have been quite chic in the 40s, sat on a park bench, laughing. There was a tall, vaguely leonine, young man sitting next to her, his arms wrapped around her waist, his chin resting on her shoulder, a twinkle in his eyes though he remained unsmiling. Rose knew the woman was her grandmother Dorea, but the man... well, she’d always known it couldn’t have been her grandfather – he was over twenty years older than her grandmother – but she’d never thought that it would be her father’s boss. She’d never thought to ask anyone who he was... but looking more carefully she thought she spotted a faint resemblance between him and Scrimgeour – she’d seen him often enough at parties. Something about the way his eyes smiled, but his lips didn’t...

She is six and she hates her velvet frock. It’s scratchy and she wishes there were kids – aside from that meanie Cormac McLaggen



– to play with. Office parties are no fun at all and Uncle Padfoot is too busy to play with her. She wants to go home.

*“And who are you, little lady?” There’s a tall man, serious-looking with white hair. But there’s something else too...*

*“You look like a lion,” she blurts out and then a second later she’s scared she’s said something wrong. “A handsome lion,” she says earnestly, hoping he won’t tell Mummy.*

*For a moment he says nothing, but then he smiles suddenly, unexpectedly and she can’t help but smile as well. He bends down and pats her head – she doesn’t tell him she doesn’t like people doing that, because he looks like a nice person. “You’re little Miss Potter aren’t you, then?” He chuckles, “Goodness, aren’t you the spitting image of Dorea. Spunky, just like your father when he was your age too.”*

*“Do you know Daddy?” she asks eagerly.*

*“I should say so – Mr. Scrimgeour at your service, my lady. Shall we join your parents? Your mother will be worried by now.”*

*It’s only when Mummy scoops her into her arms and murmurs, “I can’t believe what a little diplomat you are, darling. Making up to the Head of the Aurors’ Department himself... you’ll go far in life, won’t you, sweetheart?” that she realizes how important Mr Scrimgeour must be.*

*“If this is another innuendo-ridden piece about my grandmother’s sexual exploits,” Rose snapped, “I don’t want to read it.” I already know more than I need to about my grandmother’s parents!*

*“Since when have you been reading about your grandmother’s sexual exploits?” Neville asked interestedly. Without bothering for an answer, he scanned through the article quickly. “It isn’t.”*

*“Are you sure?” Rose demanded. “Are you sure it won’t scar me for life?”*

“Well,” Neville said cautiously. “It might. Basically old Skeeter’s trying to imply that your dad’s actually Scrimgeour’s son because your grandfather was too old to get anyone pregnant when your dad was conceived – don’t give me that look, you know he was sixty or something. Aside from that she’s trying to make out that your grandmother was a libidinous gold-digger, who paraded as a princess, tainted by Sapphic influences, a product of incest... blimey list goes on and on. Of course, that all changed when she met Scrimgeour – star-crossed romance is what she’s trying to pass it off as – only, um, the Blacks would disown her if she took up with him because he was Muggleborn, so he and she were just happy to double-cross their spouses and... er, that’s the gist of it. Also, that’s why your dad’s such a rising star. And there’s this teeny-tiny bit about you being mentally unbalanced...”

“What?” Rose shrieked, lunging for the paper.

Neville shoved her away. “Chill – its two lines long. *Dorea’s oldest granddaughter, Rose, 12, has not escaped the Black Curse or so it seems. In October of last year she was responsible for a gratuitous attack – disturbingly macabre for one so young – on a fellow student. Perhaps there is more than meets the eye to the Potter family.*”

“Oh that...” Instead of trying to find a good-enough swearword, Rose bent down and made a snowball, hurling it viciously the wall of the castle.

“Disturbingly macabre,” Neville said softly. “Don’t pay any attention to it Rose – Skeeter knows what sells and right now it’s the new Minister. A dishy romance on the side never hurts either.”

“Easy for you to say – it’s not *your* grandmother.”

“Yes well,” Neville said diplomatically, “your mother said it was all true enough – just highly colored.”

“So, I’m actually Rose Scrimgeour?” she demanded heatedly.

“I’m not saying that,” he said quickly. “She’s just made the whole thing bigger than it is... maybe they were, um, closer than friends but that’s no reason to say that you’re not...”

“This is the most degrading conversation I’ve ever had with you,” Rose snapped. “Now I’ll never hear the end of this from Greengrass – she’ll be on and on about how there’s more than meets the eye to my family. God, what is it with traditional Slytherins and family?”

“If I told you the answer to that,” Neville said seriously, “I wouldn’t be a Slytherin.” His answer could have meant so many things that Rose couldn’t be bothered to decipher each and every separate meaning.

**000**

On the first of February, Bellatrix Lestrange set down the *Daily Prophet* – which she’d read from back to back – gently on a tree stump. Holding the Classifieds page of the newspaper with trembling hands, she swept towards Bartemius, who was thinking about his newborn son. Her voice was surprisingly steady though – belying the tears that were streaming down her face, tears of gratefulness and joy so great it was frightening, “The Dark Lord has risen.”

**A/N: The poem is not mine– God, it would be totally presumptuous of me to claim writing such a beautiful piece of work – its Daniel Morgan’s.**

## ***Mud on the Floor***

*They were three almost as much as George and Fred were two. Unlike in every way; a delicate dancer, a daring Amazon, and playful, unlucky Katie, but they moved together in the air like it was one of Alicia's choreographed ballets. They were made to shine together. It was a question of fractions, a third and a third and a third made a trinity in one; the Goof, the Grace, and the Gremlin.*

## **Merry and Bright, Lady Altair**

"It's official," Rose announced, waving the newspaper above Neville's face. "The Ministry passed all those new changes for the Hogwarts curriculum – you know, about Astronomy being optional but enhancing the Muggle Studies syllabus and making it compulsory. Also, according to this we're going to get an in-house psychiatrist – whatever that is – starting from next term."

Neville looked up from the stack of photos he'd been brooding over. It was a pretty collection – a mass of fluffy, white clouds arranged in a heart-shape in a clear blue sky, a heart-shaped bouquet of lavenders, a string of beads (resembling a necklace Lavender Brown often wore), etc.... Ignoring Rose's statement he said, worriedly, "I'm afraid the flowers would look clichéd if I used them on a card – I don't want her to think that I'm a mindless, unoriginal drone. The beads are very pretty – don't you think the turquoise ones contrast so well with the light wood? – but they look too simple. And I don't want to use the clouds, they look too artificial, somehow... what do you think I should do?"

Rose bent down to examine the photos and smiled. "They're all gorgeous," she said earnestly, "I'm sure any girl would be wowed over if she got one of these. I mean, I would be pretty impressed."

He snorted. "You're just trying to make me feel better about my ugly pictures. And no guy's ever going to meet your standards until he can perform a perfect Wronski Feint."

"Well, that too," Rose admitted, "but it would be pretty cool, you know, to get a card with one of these photos on Valentine's Day. Might

almost be romantic. I think the lavenders look the best – have you decided what you’re going to write on the card?”

*“From your secret admirer, Happy Valentine’s Day,”* he said, puckering his forehead. “Do you think I should use the lavenders? Then I suppose I’ll have to use silver gilt calligraphy and it isn’t as nice as the turquoise one but I can’t possibly use turquoise and lavender together... the colors would simply clash here.”

“It won’t be a secret,” Rose reminded him. “No one’s as artistic as you – but don’t worry about that, she’ll be delighted. Probably, no one from first to third year will get as nice a card as the one you’re making for her. She’ll know that she’s a lucky girl.” She smiled warmly at him and was rewarded by a slow smile on his part and a thank-you. She’d come around to the fact – or rather Ron had made her come around – that Neville really, really liked Lavender and that she shouldn’t do anything about it. Though she tried to content herself with the thought that it was only a short-term crush, a part of her was still irrationally jealous of Lavender for enjoying a part of Neville that she would never get. *She’d* never be the girl whom he spent hours designing beautiful cards for.

*Do you still remember everything you saw in the Mirror of Erised?*

*Are you going to bring all that junk up again...?*

*Of course, I am. You saw yourself killing your best friend, Neville Longbottom. Do you know why?*

*No. Why?*

*You are an insanely possessive person. Domineering to the point of being dictatorial, jealous of the slightest encroachments on what you perceive to be your territory... I don’t know about now, but then you wanted to keep him to yourself forever, seal him to you. And what better way then by sending him to his death, where he would never be anyone else’s?*

Maybe she was. But if she was, now was the time to change all that, wasn’t it? She was twelve-and-a-half already and, well, now was the present and you were supposed to do good stuff in the present

without waiting for the future. Not that the future was a time or anything, as Uncle Padfoot had once told her, the future was a hypothetical premise that could never be reached because to reach it would be to counter innumerable walls of paradox. Or something like that.

And with those good intentions in mind she'd launched Rose Version 1993 – to not hurt anyone (though that was hard, seeing that people got hurt so easily), to work harder, and to be, in general, a better person. Of course, as Blaise had said when she'd told him – in an unguarded moment – about her plan, "it's *possible*, what you're suggesting, but it's not probable. You'll never be the kind of girl you want to be now." Well, she'd show him. She'd show him.

**000**

*February 2*

*Time flies doesn't it? I still remember the day Mum read us Alice in Wonderland. Neville was totally impressed by the Queen of Hearts and he kept singing, "Off with his head, off with her head, off, off," for the next few days. And he told me that that's what he wanted to do to every little girl because all little girls were really, really annoying just like Hannah. I reminded him that I was a girl – not little, but a girl – and then he opened his eyes really wide like he'd just realized that for the first time.*

**How dense. Didn't you choose to take offense as you frequently do at even the most innocent of comments or gestures?**

*Nah. I was proud – I felt the same about girls as he did when I was six. Well like I said time flies... he's taken to scribbling 'Neville and Lavender Longbottom' across the margins of his History notes and drawing hearts and wedding rings. Ugh.*

**He'll get over it you know. He's only twelve.**

*Of course I know. Nobody marries the person they loved when they were twelve! That's perfectly barbaric.*

**What about your parents? Didn't they...**

*The exception proves the rule. And besides, Daddy liked Mum when he was fifteen but he said that it took him another ten years to really and completely fall in love with her.*

### **Chocolate or raspberry?**

*What? Oh you're playing your little game again aren't you? Well chocolate. Why though.*

**Chocolate reminds me of mud, raspberry of blood. I'm glad you like chocolate, so do I. Sometimes.**

*Weeeeeird. I'd better tuck in then. Good night.*

**000**

*She is transparent, invisible when she keeps close to the shadows, but a blurred outline when she walks in the moonlight. The Disillusionment Charm is weak. Clearly, he has overestimated the girl's powers – sometimes, it is hard for him to remember his vassal is only a twelve-year-child – frail and untrained. How long the walk from the Astronomy Tower to the dungeons seems... When he had his own body, when he was able to take longer strides – how slow she seems in comparison – it seemed but a short distance. How he misses...*

"Oof! What the fuck?"

Rose woke up abruptly to darkness and found herself lying, curled up, on a cold, stone floor.

Then, wandlight flashed in her face quite suddenly and she shrieked in surprise, covering her eyes, on instinct, with her hand.

"What the-" a voice began, but stopped. A hand gripped her elbow and pulled her up. Groggy and confused beyond measure, she let him – she'd recognized the voice already.

"Hey Smith," she muttered sleepily, rubbing her eyes. "Long time no – ahhh – sorry, long time no sleep. See, I mean, see – long time no see, yes, that's right."

Painfully blunt as ever, the first words out of his mouth were, “Are you stoned?”

“Am I?” she muttered. “Oh dear, Mum will be disappointed in me. If she ever gets to know, I mean. Which she won’t. So, um, she won’t be disappointed. That’s fine.”

Wandlight flashed in her face again and she groaned, slumping against the stone wall that he’d pulled her against. “Don’t *do* that. It’s mean.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Princess Blossom. Would you prefer softer, emerald-tinted light to bring out the green in your bee-yoo-ti-full eyes?”

Rose chose to ignore him and roughly pried his fingers off of her elbow. She realized, suddenly, she was wearing her dressing gown and the situation was – to put it mildly – quite surreal. No, actually, it was pretty ridiculous. “Where are we? What time is it?”

Smith looked like he was struggling with his conscience – between his sense of what was good and would take him to Heaven sooner, Help-the-Pitiable-Freak, and his natural principles, Be-Unhelpful-to-the-Enemy-even-if-it-doesn’t-benefit-you. Finally, his sense of humanity won the day and gruffly he said, “about three o’clock.”

“There’s no need to get shirty,” she yawned, trying to muster up the contempt that she should have been answering him with, but failing. She just sounded awfully sleepy. Fumbling for her wand in the pocket of her robes – she always kept it in her robes before she went to sleep, it had become a habit, she murmured, “*Flagrantia*.” A ball of fire flew from the tip and landed neatly in the iron flambeau placed on the wall – Rose knew there’d be one because, in almost all the corridors at Hogwarts she’d been through, there were flambeaux positioned at regular intervals on the walls. She proceeded to perform the charm several times until the whole corridor was lit.

“Cool,” Smith breathed, impressed for a moment. But then he quickly added, “not that I can’t do it too, of course.”



Rose ignored him. "I've never been here," she frowned. There was nothing to set this corridor apart from any other corridor – no distinguishing tapestry or statue or picture. It was your generic Hogwarts corridor.

"You probably have," he returned. "Your sadly underdeveloped brain just isn't versatile enough to recognize it in semi-darkness."

It was just too late at night to yell at someone creatively. Or even yell at all without breaking out into a yawn in the middle. Her eyes felt itchy and all she wanted to do was curl up in her nice warm bed – her feet felt so cold, like she'd been walking around the castle for a long time. *I'll think about why I'm here, later*, she thought. *Maybe it's all just a bad dream. Which begs the question – just why am I dreaming about Zacharias Tosser Smith?*

"Just tell me how far the dungeons are from here and I'll leave you to masturbate *in semidarkness*," Rose snapped, clutching her robe tighter around herself.

"Why should I even tell you?" he said smugly. "It's your own stupid fault you're here and I, for one, have no interest in solving your problems for you." *As if there's a whole bevy of people waiting to solve my problems for me*, she thought indignantly, as he strode away with exaggeratedly long steps. She ran to catch up with him – she couldn't just stay in the corridor! Better to follow him, at least he'd take her somewhere.

"So where are we going?" she demanded, lighting her wand just like him. "Prefect's bathroom? The Lake? Astronomy Tower?"

He turned around and shot her a disgusted look. "Why," he demanded, "would I want to go to three places that are strictly out-of-bounds for students at night?"

*You know, the whole freakin' castle is out of bounds for students at night.* "Zacharias, my friend," she cooed, skipping towards him and putting a friendly arm – which he promptly shoved off – over his shoulder. "Did you not hear my last comment? I asked you whether you came here, all alone at night, to masturbate and, non-verbally, you acquiesced – yes, don't be too shy to admit this, my poor child. It

is quite a common phenomenon among teenagers of your age, deprived so cruelly of sexual pleasures, they are forced to turn to the trusty hand to achieve the mental and physical satisfaction denied to them...”

It took him about three seconds to register what she'd just said. And then he threw back his head and laughed. No, not just laughed, roared more like it, so loudly, with such lack of inhibition that first, Rose jumped back in fright and then, thought angrily, like her mother might have, *Really how uncouth*. In the semi-darkness, it sounded worse than it would have in daytime – almost (but not quite) scary. “Shut up,” she said sharply, clutching her wand tightly.

“Why?” he yelled, really yelled, in between his laughter. “Am I scaring you, Princess?”

“Of course, you are, it's really a matter of serious concern that they're actually selling Ecstasy to twelve-year-olds,” she said, fear roughening her voice. “Wandering the corridors at night, high... your conduct alarms me.”

“Thirteen,” he muttered, rubbing his nose. “And you wouldn't mind, would you, if I fell out of a window and cracked my head open, while I was wandering around high?”

*Well, not really.* “What are we doing here?” she demanded, “I thought you were going to take me back to the dungeons.”

“Fuck me gently with a chainsaw,” he said – quite rudely, in Rose's opinion. “Who do you think I am, Mother Teresa?”

*Your alarming proclivity for picking fights on any occasion indicates that you will never – no, not even if you're reincarnated a gazillion times – be Mother Teresa.* “Masochistic are we, tonight?” Rose said, wrinkling her nose. She put her wand back, deciding there was no need for it, and dug her hands into her pockets. “Your reference to chainsaws-,” she stopped abruptly as her fingers brushed against a piece of parchment in her pocket. Since when, had she been storing spare pieces in her pockets like Ron?

“What’s the matter?” Smith demanded, looking around anxiously as though he expected to see a monster behind him. “What’s...”

*“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,”* Rose said quietly, tapping the parchment. She didn’t notice Smith scurry towards her in fear until his head was touching hers and he said in a very startled voice, “what the hell is this?”

Rose’s head shot up abruptly and her forehead knocked – hard – against his chin. “Ow,” she yelped, stumbling back, the map falling from her hands.

“What the-” he began again but stopped, as he took in the rest of the parchment. “Oh. Oh.”

Yes. *Oh. Oh.* She’d had nearly the same reaction when she’d seen the Marauders’ Map the year before. She stood a little away from him, her hands crossed defensively on her chest, rapidly assessing the situation, while he gawped at the map. She wasn’t completely sure that the map wasn’t, well, illegal – for a student to have. What if he told someone about it? Would it get Daddy and Uncle Padfoot into trouble too? What if he ever tried to blackmail her about it? Not that he looked smart enough to even comprehend the concept of blackmail, his mouth hanging wide open as it was, but you never could tell... Making her voice cool and noncommittal she stepped towards him and pulled the map out of his hands, “yes, it’s a useful little tool.”

“Is it yours?” he demanded, looking excited. “It’s amazing, it is...”

“It’s Flint’s,” she said, “I’ve been begging him for ages to lend me it.”

“How fascinating,” he murmured. “I never knew that Professor Lupin and Flint were on such close terms.”

That jolted her. “What?” she yelped, forgetting her plan to be cool and noncommittal.

*“Messers Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs,”* he sang. “I’m not completely dense, you know – I’ve heard you calling Professor Lupin, Uncle Moony, and I know that your godfather’s your Uncle Padfoot or

whatever. Why don't you add *Miss Flobberworm* at the end of the list? Since you're at about the same intellectual level as a..."

She'd tried, she'd tried but in these circumstances it was simply impossible to uphold Rose Version 1993. Impossible and, for her, improbable.

Rose slapped his cheek. Not too hard, because she was tired, but certainly not gently. It was just a slap, unclassifiable, almost a reflex action. He punched her in the stomach, but with no real vigor. Fair enough. Somehow it managed to diffuse the tension and Rose knew – though she wouldn't have been able to say how – he wouldn't tell anyone. Well, at least not until he needed to. "I should be getting back," she muttered, awkwardly, fiddling with the map. "It was, um, nice meeting you." *How sophisticated.*

He nodded and held up his fingers in a mock salute, before striding away, leaving her all alone. Suddenly, she realized just how cold it was.

**000**

They heard the announcement at breakfast the next morning. Rose's immediate instinct was to swipe a quick look at the Gryffindor Table – Oliver Wood had half-risen, mouth wide open, and Alicia Spinnet, her fork halfway to her mouth had paused mid-laugh looking like someone had knocked the wind out of her. And then the image of a girl in the Gryffindor Quidditch uniform, her long, black hair rippling about her face in the wind, of a slender, dark boy with dreadlocks swam before Rose and she thought that she might start crying. *Angelina Johnson... Lee Jordan...*

Midnight tête-à-tête... Astronomy Tower... mud on the floor... message: *As filthy as your blood...* inside work...

Words on words and a strange sense of loss. They were – had been, she reminded herself with a sick feeling in her gut – a trio, always in a graceful tandem while they were playing – Angelina, Alicia, Katie. She'd never liked Angelina – they'd been enemies on principle, just because they were on opposite house teams, Gryffindor and Slytherin players nursed blood feuds on principle – but now... *It was*

*meaningless*. Lee, Lee Jordan, who snuck in a Niffler in Lockhart's office in November. Who'd mocked and taunted her, never seriously, of course, just on principle. She couldn't believe it, that he was dead. That kind of thing was only supposed to happen in storybooks – people you knew, not very well, but well enough weren't just supposed to die like that. It was *wrong*.

Midnight tête-à-tête...

So they'd been dating, had they? And then they'd died together. That was romantic, wasn't it, when you said it about two ninety-five-year-olds – they loved each other, they died together? What was it then, when you said it about fourteen-year-olds? Whispers had broken out, like little wildfires, all through the Hall when Dumbledore had stood up, an unusually solemn look on his face, the twinkle in his eyes gone and said, "be prepared for bad news." When he'd reached the word 'casualties' the low hum had risen to a distinct rumble while students twisted and turned frantically in their seats – even getting up, ignoring Snape's glares – to check that their friends and siblings were still there. But when the names were called out – names that didn't belong to people now, Rose thought faintly – even the distinct rumble had been abandoned for an all-out roar of sheer paranoia.

Dumbledore waited until the din subsided. Rose saw Flint get up and stride across the room towards the Gryffindor Table. In disbelief, she saw him bend over Wood – who was now openly crying while Katie Bell held him, looking too stunned to even get up and leave – and pat his shoulder kindly, saying, "I'm sorry. Come on now..." *Kindly*. Ungloatingly.

Rose wondered why they hadn't been told before – it was just cruel to tell them in the Great Hall, with everyone, and then realized that the Professors had probably been too busy dealing with other things – *the bodies, the parents*, she thought with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach – to inform them.

"My God," Blaise whispered in awe, "Flint's actually... and Wood's... Aphrodite's sugary tits."

“Behold Death – the Great Joiner,” she heard a sixth-year say. “Have you ever heard of a Slytherin Captain and a Gryffindor Captain... someone really should take a photo.”

Wood had staggered up somehow, and, half-supported by the rest of his team members and McGonagall, he stumbled away from the Hall. After a moment of hesitation, Flint trailed after them and, to Rose’s astonishment, others on the Quidditch team – Warrington, Montague – stood up and followed. And then, suddenly, she knew where her place was. Draco didn’t get up but everyone else on the team and most of the other players on the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw teams did and, surprisingly, there were no shocked murmurs. It was just something that had to be done.

Rose caught up with Smith halfway up the staircase to the Hospital Wing. There was a stricken look on his face, more bewildered than sad. *He still doesn’t understand*, she thought as she tapped his shoulder gingerly, *he still can’t grasp it*. For a split second, she remembered the picture of his parents that she’d seen in the newspaper on the day of the trial and then her imagination painted a vivid picture of them as he would have seen them on the day of the attack – bodies carved up like Christmas turkeys, staining white, pristine kitchen tiles bright red. Pity overwhelmed her and when he turned around to look at her, she hugged him without thinking.

She hugged him the way she did Harry after someone had called him names – well, after she’d beaten the name-caller into a bloody pulp, of course – or when he’d fallen out of a tree or received an electric shock. Because at that moment, what she saw in him was the little six-year-old boy who’d seen his parents laid out, silent corpses, on the cozy kitchen floor.

He let her hug him, though he made no move to reciprocate – though she hadn’t expected that, of course. “Thanks,” he muttered awkwardly, not sounding in the least grateful – just very confused. “Erm, yeah. Thanks.”

She patted his arm, feeling equally awkward. *Why did I just do that?* And now she couldn’t see the little boy in him anymore and all she felt was very, very foolish. *Well, at least this is the kind of thing Rose*

*Version 1993 should do, she thought, trying to comfort herself. RV1993 should be nice to everyone. "You feel ok?" Well, no, of course you don't. You just heard that two of your team members got killed, at breakfast of all places. What would you feel if you heard Montague and Warrington got killed? Our star Beaters? What about Draco and Marcus?*

He half-shrugged, looking like he wanted to be someplace else. He probably wasn't very articulate when it came to dealing with grief – well, that was only normal. She probably wouldn't have been either. "So, I'll um be off on my way," she said quickly. "So that I don't, sort of, disturb you. I mean, I don't want to intrude. That is, on your grief. Right – I don't want to intrude on your grief. But I said that, didn't I?" If she wasn't imagining it, there was a nervous smile – mirroring the one that was probably on her face – on his face. "So, er, bye-bye. See you around."

She scrambled down the stairs, while he stood silently on the step he'd been at. When she was at the bottom of the flight, he called out her name, "Potter!"

"Yeah?" she said, holding the banisters.

He looked like he was about to say thanks. But he didn't, he just gave her a little smile – a confused smile, but all the same a smile. A nice one too. Then he was gone, clambering up the stairs as quickly as though his life depended on it.

**000**

*February 5*

*Sorry, sorry for taking so long to write. I know I told you, two days ago, that I'd write back to you immediately with all the latest news last time but well there just hasn't been time. I have good reasons, really good reasons.*

**State them.**

*All of us – I mean everyone in every single House, from first to seventh year – have been sleeping out in the Great Hall for the last*

*two days while the dormitories and Common Rooms were evacuated and searched. I don't know if they were searched or inspected or whether more safety-devices or something were put in – we've been searching for those safety-devices but so far we haven't found anything, not even an extra Sneakoscope – but a huge team of people from the Ministry came over. Not Daddy and no one from Uncle Padfoot's department though.*

*So we slept out on sleeping bags in the Hall and boy, let me tell you they are WAY uncomfortable. Downright painful in the morning. And it's impossible to fall asleep if you keep on hearing sixth and seventh years whispering "I love you, baby" "Me too" "No I love you more" "No, I do" ad nauseam. The fourth and fifth years, immature berks all of them, mostly stick to groping eachother and moaning eachother's names just like they're on the tip of an orgasm. Also there was the high ceiling with all the shiny stars, it was just like being out in the open and I kept thinking philosophical stuff – I can you know – and well then it was hard to fall asleep.*

*Sleep deprivation, listening to Lockhart blather on and on about how HE knows perfectly well what the matter is, writing back to Mum to assure her that I'm still alive (she's practically hysterical), watching everyone so sad and miserable and scared (Ron is, he's totally worried one of us is going down next no matter what we tell him), just looking at the members of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team (they looks three-quarters dead), being allowed to go to the toilet only in a pack with other girls and escorted by a teacher (usually McGonagall, don't get me started on how scary that woman can be when she's in a bad mood)... see why I haven't been able to write to you? No time, no energy.*

**It must have all been very traumatizing for you.**

*Totally.*

**Well, it certainly does not do to dwell upon the past. We must continuously move forward, with our future goals in clear sight.**

*Listen, I'm traumatized right now, OK? I don't have any future goals.*



**Sweet Morgana – how on earth did you become a Slytherin?  
Your lack of ambition is...**

*I mean, I don't have any future goals in 'clear sight'. I have them in unclear sight. And I don't feel so good.*

**Nothing like learning a nice, handy, little spell to bolster your sinking spirits! Come now, why don't I teach you the Permeability Spell – Poroso? It's a work of art.**

*Why should I?*

**Rose Potter...**

*OK, OK. I guess a bit of spellwork wouldn't hurt – I haven't been studying at all these last few days. What does it do?*

**I'm quite proud of myself – the mere mention of that spell has infused a healthy vigor into your fading spirit, your mien has become acquiescent and charming as of old...**

*Oh, shut up. What does it do?*

**Tsk, tsk, what discourtesy. But I'll let it pass – tonight. It allows you to walk through a solid medium, to pass through whatsoever obstacle or barrier stands in your way as though it was air, in short, permits you to permeate, in a matter of speech...**

*It sounds interesting, but would you please, cut the crap?*

**Eager to get down to business, are we? Well, if you're ready, then so am I. But I must warn you that it is quite complex, and you would do well to focus all your energy on the spell. One misstep... well, the result won't be pretty.**

*I'm ready.*

**000**

The world was in chaos for the next few weeks. Quidditch – practices, matches – had been put on indefinite hiatus. The newspapers were in a frenzy. Fingers were being pointed at the teachers – *it must have been inside work, otherwise the Perytons would have caught the intruders*. Mum's letters were almost hysterical ("Oh darling, I was thinking about how good Beauxbatons would be...") and even Uncle Padfoot's sounded worried. Teachers escorted them to every class. Security trolls manned all the corridors and the entrances to all of the Common Rooms. There was even talk of closing the school.

"Will they?" she asked Uncle Moony worriedly, after one of his classes. "What'll we do if we can't go to Hogwarts?"

"People like Draco will probably turn to Durmstrang," he'd said with chilling logic. "You might be home schooled, or the Ministry might decide to set up classes in a temporary structure somewhere..."

"But it won't be *Hogwarts*," she wailed. "No temporary structure's going to have the Forbidden Forest or the Quidditch field or the Lake or Hogsmeade."

"Or the Whomping Willow," he muttered. But then, seeing her doleful face, he'd forced a smile. "Cheer up – I doubt they'll really close the school. Hogwarts has dealt with similar crises throughout the centuries and I have no doubt that it will continue to do so with equal élan."

*Hogwarts? Élan? Well, that'll be the day.* "What similar crises?" she demanded.

"The Wars of the Roses – dreadful civil strife, and that was Pre-Seclusion, of course, so you must understand that Muggles and wizards were quite closely connected then. The Goblin Riots – they had to rebuild the Northern Section of the castle after all the explosions. The Giant Rebellion of 1771 – quite a minor uprising, in historical perspective, but there was a nasty death toll involved in Hogsmeade, where the final battle played out. Things like that you know – or you would know if you'd been paying attention in History classes."

Rose sincerely hoped that he was right – she couldn't imagine the thought of leaving Hogwarts forever. Well, at least, not right now. While she was on her evening run around the Quidditch stadium – just to keep in practice so that she was as fit and Quidditch-ready as ever – she pondered over what he'd said. Would the mystery be solved? She knew that the Aurors were working on it – she'd seen several of them visiting Hogwarts, though Daddy hadn't been with them, of course, now that he was Head of the Department he would practically be exempt from 'field jobs' – but even the Aurors had their limits.

There had been no revealing clues – magic had not been used for the murders, that much was known. *Avada Kedavra* left its own signature trace of magic – faint, yes, but legible to those well versed in magic – on corpses. No physical damage had been noted on the bodies either. Poison was possible – there were poisons that would disintegrate in the bloodstream before the bodies could be sent for post-mortem.

Blaise was leaning against the walls of the stadium, a magazine and a cigarette in his hand, when she'd finished her run. He handed the first to her and took a long, slow drag with practiced ease on the second. "You're disgusting," she told him, feeling hypocritical, as she scanned through the newest issue of *Quidditch International*, which he'd been considerate enough to bring for her. "Where's Neville?"

"Busy on his preparations for fair Lady Lavender's Valentine's Day card," Blaise snorted. "And if I'm disgusting, you're naïve."

"Better naïve than dead of lung cancer before I'm forty," she murmured. "Hey, look at this – Krum's team won the finals! Blimey, I pegged it on Greece this time... damnit, now I owe Warrington five Galleons."

"Isn't he only fifteen or sixteen?" Blaise said interestedly. "Quite a character, isn't he?"

"Mmm... superb use of the Fishroll Dive in combination with the Ballerina's Whip," Rose chuckled. "Now, *that's* my kind of guy."

"I thought you preferred them tall, dark, and handsome," Blaise laughed, discarding his cigarette and throwing an arm around her waist.

"Clichéd – besides you're not tall."

"Well, I can't help it if you're a behemoth, can I?" he said cheerfully, "Come on, let's go, I'm freezing."

As she scanned through the rest of the article – quite loud in its praise of young Viktor Krum – Rose asked Blaise suddenly, "do you think they're going to close Hogwarts?"

"God, I hope not," Blaise said earnestly. "I don't think I'd be able to stand it at Durmstrang – you wouldn't be there, Sultana of my Heart."

"I would pine away if I were kept away from you for even a day, Light of my Eyes," Rose laughed. "Really, can't you ever be serious?"

"You can be serious with Neville all the time," he said comfortably. "You need someone to teach you how to lighten up." He squeezed her waist suggestively.

"Oh, I don't need you for that," she said seriously, "I have Zachy-poo for that – we're in the throes of an adorable girl-meets-boy, ensuing-awkwardness-and-mushy-cuteness relationship with a dash of illicit Gryffindor-Slytherin passion to keep us warm."

"Do you really want me to fight a duel with him, Flower of my Soul? My blood boils when I think of him staring into your radiant, pickled-toad-green eyes, murmuring sweet nothings into your seashell-shaped, coral-tinted ears..."

"*Seashell-shaped?*" Rose said indignantly. "I remind you of seashells?"

"And there you go again, on a tangent," he sighed dramatically. "Really, I thought we were going to be serious with each other. I was on the point of bringing up the dangers of our present position in Hogwarts up to you, but there you go again..."

“You’re an idiot,” she laughed, kissing his cheek, “you’re just a loveable, punchable idiot.” He smiled dazzlingly as they walked up the stone steps to the castle, leaving Rose to wonder how she’d ever thought Smith had a nice smile. He was nothing compared to Blaise.

It was nice and toasty-warm inside the Great Hall. Rose glanced regretfully towards the Hufflepuffs, – *Lucky you, you get the kitchens for dorms!* – before taking her place at the Slytherin Table next to Draco. He acknowledged her with a brief nod before turning to his own copy of *Quidditch International*. Seeing the cover, under the bright light of a thousand candles, the picture of the Bulgarian Quidditch Team in their scarlet uniforms made her feel guilty somehow; guilty about how happy she’d been a few minutes before. Angelina and Lee had once worn scarlet-and-gold robes like those. Had she any right to be happy, so disgustingly happy?

**000**

*February 9*

**I sense forlornness in your tone. Is anything the matter?**

*No, not exactly. I just... I just feel bad about being happy. It feels wrong.*

**My sympathies. Now, tell me, how is work going along with the Poroso charm? Did you try it on the paperclips, like I told you to?**

*You only care about how far along I’m getting with that stupid spell.*

**Yes, I’m afraid that’s all that interests me about you.**

*Excuse me?*

**Can’t you take a joke in the right sense?**

*Didn’t sound like a joke to me.*

**Really? Well, that’s a pity. Now it should.**

...

...

...

**Should we continue our work on the *Poroso* charm?**

*As you wish, my lord.*

**Excellent.**

**A/N: Next up is pre-Valentine's day – rather interesting. But this is the last chapter I'm posting before September – my exams start from the middle of August, so don't expect any more updates next month.**

## Secrets

“Draco, wait up!”

Draco turned around, startled, and saw Rose sprinting towards him at full speed. Blaise trailed after her, hands jammed into his pockets, and just shrugged when Draco arched an incredulous eyebrow. “Neville’s developing the film somewhere in the dungeons,” he told Rose quickly, guessing that that was her question. “If you’re looking for him then don’t bother – he’ll probably go to the Hall for dinner soon.”

There was a feverish brightness in Rose’s eyes, but he couldn’t tell if that was because of the exercise or because she was sick. It might have been either – she’d been acting rather oddly, even more oddly than normal, the entire day. Sullen and pensive by bouts and unusually quiet, even furtive. Like she had a secret. “Shoo Zabini,” she said, waving him away impatiently.

“But my sweet amaryllis, my iridescent amethyst,” Blaise protested, grinning. *Does he even know how much of a monkey he looks like?* Draco thought but with the politeness characteristic of him refrained from saying so. Really, he was so very polite and considerate about other people’s feelings... almost unnaturally so.

“Your amethyst wants you to put her bag away in the Common Room away for her,” Rose informed him, looking down at him grandly. “If you manage to please her, she might grace you in the true fashion of a courtly, um... what was that you called me? Oh right, amaryllis. Yeah, I’ll be all amaryllis-y to you if you lug this for me.” She took Draco’s arm and steered him away, announcing, “We need to talk.”

*Why?* Rapidly assessing the advantage her superior height, weight, and experience would give her in a physical fight, he didn’t protest; though, naturally, he was highly aggrieved that he would be parted from his dinner for a few more minutes. Really, girls had no sense of chivalry. There were broom-cupboards all over the palace – most likely built by the congenial Founders for the convenience of the young and passionate – and Rose seemed to have a thorough knowledge of them (probably taught by Blaise), because she shoved

Draco into one before he'd had a chance to ask her what she wanted with him.

And then she shut the door behind her.

It was dark and cobwebby and smelly and very, very squashy in the broom-cupboard. He was so close to her that he could smell the lingering smell of sweat on her neck, and the oddly bittersweet smell of orange and cinnamon on her hair that he'd come to associate with Tracey. Rose had probably been pilfering Tracey's shampoo. Understandable, considering that Tracey had gorgeous hair and Rose, well... didn't. "Why are we, um... here?" he demanded, shivering as a spider crawled up his polished shoes.

"To talk, of course." She laughed suddenly and it was an ugly sound. He could feel her hand crawling up from his wrist, her ragged nails digging into his skin. "We haven't done much talking this term, have we? Why, Draco, why?"

"Stop that," he said harshly as a nail dug sharply into his elbow. "Now, I mean it."

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" She didn't stop, her hands had trailed up to his shoulders and now they were tracing light patterns over his neck, making it tingle uncomfortably. He tried to shift away from her, to move towards the exit, but her long body was blocking it. He hated tall women. "Ooh, I think I am. You know Draco, I never realized it, but it's actually... fun to be a woman. Even a miniature one. Of course, this is all in the strictest confidence, you understand – don't think about mentioning it to dear Lucius."

"Potter, if you don't move this instant, I'll hex you into the next dimension." *Where is the next dimension?*

"Feisty, aren't you? Just like your auntie – ah, Bella'd love to hear me say that." She was playing with his hair now, mussing up the smooth slickness he worked so hard to maintain. Draco shivered as her pinkie caressed a particularly sensitive spot beneath his ear. He leaned back into the wall, suddenly not wanting her to open the door. Really this was... this was actually nice.



*You're being sexually harassed! Raped against your will!  
Proteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeest! NOW!*

Right. Protest. But, oh, this was so... ah. Good. "You're a very lucky boy, you know. Maybe you'll be of some use to me when you're older." Her voice was the softest of coos and as she said it, she gently disentangled one of her hands from his hair and reached down into her skirt pocket. Though he was practically on top of her, he never even felt her taking out her wand – until it was digging into his ribs. By then it was already too late.

**000**

Muffin, the house-elf, was combing her hair, as she always did before Druella retired for the night. It was the time of day that Druella had always loved best, even as a little girl. The prepare-for-bed rituals, especially the combing part.

As a child, it had been Mother who'd brushed her hair the customary hundred strokes and, as she'd brushed, sang. Her voice had been exquisite; the only beautiful thing about her Druella had not inherited. Perhaps that was why she'd been so drawn to Dorea, as a friend and as a lover – lark-voiced and seemingly so vulnerable, just like Mother.

As a young woman, it had been Cygnus who had smoothed back the glossy, golden waves with a comb of silver-and-pearl and, more often than not, slipped a jewel or a rose into it. That was Cygnus' way of showing love – with presents. Meda, in the first flush of teenage rebellion, had decided it was his way of buying her off for some terrible secret she knew.

And now... now it was Muffin. She'd once dreamed it would be her first-born granddaughter; that they'd share the rapport that she and Bella never had. She'd never imagined Bella would so stalwartly refuse to have children or even that she'd marry doddering Rodolphus, twenty years older than her. Just went to show that dreams counted for nothing, and that nowadays, like Walburga used to say, you couldn't even lean on your own flesh-and-blood.

Though, it was a pity to have to agree with Old Wail on anything.

"Thank you, that will do," Druella said and Muffin bowed her way out of the boudoir. The filmy lace drapes over the windows blew in the chill night air. Below she heard a shutter banging – a storm was brewing. Nothing to worry about, of course, the elves would tend to everything. They always did. She rose to shut the windows of her boudoir and absentmindedly surveyed herself in the mirror. Even without transfiguring her face and hair she looked beautiful. A tall, slim woman with a haughty, imperious face and eyes so crisply blue and skin so white that you passed over her wrinkles and lines. Her hair, though quite silver now, was as thick and glossy as ever. Yes, she thought with satisfaction, she had aged gracefully, weathering the years perhaps even better than her eldest daughter.

Bellatrix, if she lived to see the day, would be a haggard, half-bald, decrepit hag, just like Walburga had been, when she was her mother's age. Andromeda would achieve the nondescriptance she'd craved for in the years of her courtship with Ted; the only remnant of her former youth and beauty would be in her eyes, softened by the forgiving years. And Narcissa... Druella thought with pride of her favorite daughter, and decided that she would be as lovely as she was now. In a grandmotherly way, of course.

She walked towards her bedroom, fingering the flimsy, lacy folds of her negligee and thought of Nymphadora and Draco, her two beautiful grandchildren. It had been so long since Christmas when she'd last seen them both. Sometimes, it made her sad that Nymphadora never visited, never wrote... it would have been nice to be closer. But whose fault was it really? She was forced to concede that it was hers – she'd never attempted to conceal her revulsion at Meda's choice of husband, never failed to imply that she considered Nymphadora inferior to Draco, delivered so many cruel putdowns to Meda...

Well, she'd made many mistakes in life. Everyone did. That didn't mean that they couldn't be repaired... if not fully, then partially. She didn't deserve to ask for much – a letter once in a while, perhaps a cup of tea now and then. She'd have to start working for that.

*I'll write her a letter now. I'll explain, she'll understand. She never was a bad girl at heart. Everything will be alright.*

Smiling, she walked into her bedroom, the walls practically papered with mirrors (a tribute to her inordinate vanity). They cast no reflection of the tall, darkly handsome, sixteen-year-old boy who was perched on the arm of her chaise lounge. There was a contemptuous smile on his face as she opened her mouth to ask him who he was.

She never wrote the letter she'd intended to.

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"You're going to kill yourself, y'know?"

James could tell that the Wigtown Wanderers had won by the way Belén smelt – her breath reeked of Gillywater. As a tribute to the great Quidditch-ing gods of Wigtown, Belén always went and out got properly, thoroughly, and devastatingly smashed whenever they defeated their historical archrivals – the Montrose Magpies. It was one of the things he'd always liked about her – the reckless lack of restraint in the most inconsequential matters, something he, under Lily's strictly enforced discipline, would never be able to indulge in.

She was swinging her legs back and forth playfully on the desk, her ankles thacking – probably painfully – into the wood at monotonously regular intervals. Her four-inch high stilettos lay on the threshold to his office. "I was just packing up," he lied. "It's only eleven-thirty – Lily's had me back later."

Belén ignored him and smiled in the obscenely happy way drunks do, the type of smile that he had to return. "We *hacked* those wankers – two hundred and thirty to one hundred and seventy. You should have seen Lynch."

*I see him enough on my daughter's walls, thanks. The Greek God of Quidditch... ugh.* "You should be getting back too. A good night's rest – I'll expect you to be in top working condition tomorrow. There's a lot of fine print on the new policy put down by the Garamond Confederacy – I have my notes stacked up for you on what you're supposed to be looking out for."

She twirled a lock of dark brown hair around her fingers. "Won't you be the gentleman and take me home?" She was trying for coy, he

knew, but all that reached him was sleepy. “If I Splinch myself on the way back it’ll be your fault, y’know.”

“Take the Knight Bus.” He gently extricated a folder she was sitting on and shoved it into her arms. “These are my notes for you – take a good strong Hangover Potion tomorrow and start on it as soon as you can.”

“Slavedriver,” he heard her mutter, but the words were very slurred. She yawned and slid down his desk, the folder tucked under her arm, and leant over to kiss him on the cheek.

She smelt terrible – a mix of peppermint and Gillywater and something vaguely parchment-y. She looked terrible too – part trashed Lolita, part Knockturn Galleon-an-hour whore, her hair straggling down from its normal bouncy ponytail, kohl smeared so that she looked raccoon-ish, and dark circles making her hollow-cheeked, little face seem even thinner and smaller than ever. He pictured Lily back at home, her dark red hair redolent of her familiar, comforting vanilla-and-violets fragrance, probably in her favorite nightdress, the slinky, satin one that reminded him of an evening gown more than anything else, as pretty and perfect as always. Not for the first time was he terribly, terribly glad that he hadn’t made the worst mistake of his life, nine years ago.

Long after she’d left, he was still browsing through his papers. The Victorian ormolu clock that Mother had intended, years ago, to give to her daughter-in-law – but after a glance at her daughter-in-law’s pedigree had changed her mind – chimed for twelve. He almost jumped, startled, at the sudden sound. Then, he eased back slowly into his chair, heart still beating quickly.

*“Remember, boys and girls, there’s never any reason to be scared of things that go bump in the night. Real danger always sneaks up on you without a warning.”*

He wondered why he was on edge tonight – the day had been slow and easy, a nice day actually. For the first time in weeks there hadn’t been anything in the papers about his inefficiency, the rank nepotism that had favored his rise, his mother’s insanity, etc. He’d even managed to run a quick eye over the reports of Hogwarts’ scan.

There'd been a few minor hitches – a necklace cursed with a secondary degree *Accido*-category charm in a Slytherin sixth-year's dorm, a Hufflepuff seventh-year in possession of chocolates laced with arsenic, something dark in Rose's own dorm (a date had been set for it to be investigated, but he hadn't written to her) – but for the major part it was, if not safe, then, at least not very dangerous.

Though, as Sirius said, ten pounds of Love Potions were hardly safe in the fourth-year Ravenclaw girls' dormitories.

He laughed a little at the memory. The sound was strange in the silence. Deciding that he'd put a wrap on things in twenty minutes, he went back to his work. Borgin wanted a ten Galleon increase on the official bribes the Ministry paid him to tally suspects but that was just ridiculous, look at the price of inflation – beetles' eyes were being sold for two Knuts a shovel-full at all the standardized apothecaries Lily said, it was probably because of all the hassles in the Abyssinian corner and God only knew that the Ministry ought to take a firmer stand on the points he'd raised on the Garamond commission, but, of course, the Heads were all...

He didn't know when he fell asleep but what he did know was that he woke up screaming at three in the morning. There was a smashing pain in his knee and he was lying on something fluffy and... carpety. The lights were still on and he was lying on the floor, his knee against the sharp edge of his desk. The chair had fallen backwards. *Must have fallen off and hit my leg.* Slowly, his back aching, he raised himself to a sitting position. It was nothing... just another nightmare. With a twinge of guilt, he belatedly remembered Healer Smythesson's foul – but effective – antidote.

He crawled backwards so he was leaning against the desk. He knew how foolish he must look – a grown man, curled up like a defensive cat, sucking his thumb like a little boy. Well, he had a right to do that – it was *his* office. He stood up stiffly, deciding it was high time he headed back home. Throwing his cloak over his shoulders, he hobbled out and walked down the rows of silent, dark cubicles. It was so lonely after hours – nobody was working out this late.

The Atrium was comfortably lit and the night watchman was striding down the hall with two letters in his hands. He looked up when he saw James and smiled. "These are for you, came just a minute ago. I was just heading down to give 'em to you."

"Thank you," James said and took the letters. One was from home, he could guess, just a hasty note scribbled on a pad of pink paper; the other had the seal of Hogwarts on it. How odd... had Rose done something again? He opened the letter as the watchman sat down on his stool and began to read his magazine.

In later years, he was always able to remember the little details of that moment with almost supernatural clarity – the magazine had been *Witch Weekly* and he'd briefly decided that the man was gay, his own nails had been a bit raggedy, his shoes beautifully polished, the lights a bit too bright, – almost jarring – the letters had been in Dumbledore's smooth, flowing script, and the ink his favorite bottle green. Well, James had good reason to remember those details later.

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. Potter,*

*Your daughter, Rose, was found two hours ago in a state of coma, in a broom-cupboard, with Mr. Draco Malfoy, a fellow student, who was in the same condition as her. We have exhausted all our skill on them and suspect that they have been possessed, – by a dark force rather than a light force, which has not yet responded to the preliminary treatments. Further spells cannot be cast on either of the minors without their legal guardians' consent. We urge both of you to arrive as soon as possible – the situation demands your utmost attention.*

*Albus Dumbledore*

**A/N: And the plot turns! Again! Yeah I'm always a bit sugar-high after my exams, it'll wear off in a week. Something Desiqtie mentioned... would you like me to include a scene with Riddle wearing a pink, shimmery negligee sitting on a gothic throne, Hades-style, and telling his minions about the joys of womanhood? I mean, I want to write a scene like that! And yes, I know nondescriptance is a word. It's just not mentioned in any dictionary.**

**PS: I'm not really mean enough to leave you on this cliffhanger... I promise I'll update very soon!**

## ***From the Frying Pan***

*“... and into the fire.”*

It was evident Narcissa Malfoy hadn't enjoyed a single moment of comprehension or clarity since she'd received the news. She gave the distinct impression of a woman trapped in another reality, alienated from the one she was now forced in.

Her hair was a matted, golden tangle over her sagging shoulders. Her mouth, not tightly pursed as usual, gave one the curious impression of vulnerability, shaped as it was like a fragile china doll's. Even the tilt of her patrician nose seemed less contemptuous and her fingers, bereft of the usual rings, looked almost too thin as they rested over her son's grey forehead.

She was quiet though, too exhausted to even clutch at the straws of reality. Since she'd arrived, all she'd done had been sit next to Draco, Draco who looked younger, - smaller than he normally did, - as a tangle of oddly-angled limbs under the regulation, white hospital blankets. “My poor angel,” had been all she'd whispered, in all those hours.

Across from Draco, Rose looked like she was frozen in a nightmare. Her mouth was half-open, like she was about to scream, and there was an ugly purple bruise spreading across her jaw where she'd fallen. Lily, her breath sucked in so that her cheekbones stood out sharply, her eyes so narrow it was a wonder she could see, was writing at the desk next to her daughter's bed.

Letters would have to be sent everywhere – to Sirius who was looking after Harry and Snidget, to Petunia because Petunia would have done the same for her if anything happened to Dudley or Camellia, to the Ministry, to the Juriswizards...

Four hours had passed since they'd arrived and now the sun was high in the sky. Bright shafts streamed in through the windows, forming shifting patterns of light on the grey flagstones. Lily refused to believe that anything was wrong. Everything *would* turn out alright, because... well, it had to.



Lily Evans Potter had gone through life arranging things to suit her best. Instinctively, she knew that she had to go on believing so, that she must take shelter behind the impenetrable wall of blind surety... or else. The else wasn't really an option.

Professionals, not British of course, would arrive soon to run a battery of tests over the children now that the guardians' consent had been obtained, and then... well, then something would happen. Of course, it would. Something *good*.

She considered what to write to Harry. And Sirius too. *She's not fine, but she will be? Soon?* No, that wouldn't do... it sounded too much like a pre-death condolence. Sugar-coated. Completely false.

She set down her quill impatiently and reached for the last muffin on the breakfast tray Madam Pomfrey had brought up. Mr. Malfoy had left about an hour ago, to contact his lawyers – quite understandable, she felt like doing the same, damn the wretched school – and James was 'checking the dormitories'.

*Well, good luck to him.*

Neville was coiled up on the windowsill, his chin resting on top of his knees. Ron sat next to him, swinging his legs. *Poor dears*, Lily thought sympathetically. *They're far too young to be sent through this sort of thing. I wonder what they're talking about.*

They weren't talking precisely, not in the way of a normal conversation. Neville shot out a sporadic comment, looking for all the world as though he were sinking in a quagmire of brilliant ideas (which were perhaps too brilliant to be divulged), and Ron simply looked miserable. And irritated with Neville's comments. He would probably have preferred to be alone and mourn by himself but perhaps he'd realized he wouldn't get the chance to be alone. If not Neville, then his other friends, would probably dog him faithfully to 'console and condole'. All with the best intentions in the world.

*He is a very sharp boy when he wants to be*, Lily thought absently, remembering a few erratic childhood incidents. Ron was very clever, no doubt, and Rose could hardly be called unintelligent but there had been times when Neville had outshone them both, apparently without

putting in the slightest effort. Outshone them by miles. There was more to him than met the eye.

*I wish I knew what he was thinking about.*

**000**

A roaring fire of maple logs, black tea, crumpets, and his mother-in-law awaited him when he threw open the double oak doors, inlaid with silver leaf, to the library. It took a moment for him to orient his vision. Then, he slipped back into the familiar mold Lucius Malfoy, suave, composed, and ‘luscious extraordinaire’ as Andromeda used to call him back at school.

“Druella,” he said courteously. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

*What are you doing here? Who told you? Who wrote to you? Not Cissy, certainly not me.*

Druella, seated on a sky-blue armchair of Utrecht leather that became her eyes immensely, firelight glazing her pale, fair hair with a golden sheen – she was always so vain, always wanted to look her best, – did not reply at once. She looked at him thoughtfully and then ran a finger delicately down the line of her jaw. It was a simple motion but it sent a jolt through him. He’d seen that gesture performed by someone a thousand times before. Not Druella... just someone.

*Who was it?*

“I came to pay my children a friendly call. But imagine my surprise, Lucius, when I found both of them... absent. At nine in the morning, no less. Tell me, *where*, have you been? Where is Cissy?”

She sounded, somehow, like she had a cold or a headache. Her words were not delivered with the usual die-away drawl she considered fashionable and therefore used all the time. They were crisper, brusquer; they had a feel of being somehow more straightforward. Druella Black was seldom straightforward with those she considered her equals – she thought it uncivilized.

He'd expected her to ask him that – she always did. Bellatrix used to do it too in the early days of his marriage when she'd thought Narcissa was marrying beneath herself – only slightly but still. The Blacks were above everyone, and if Druella had had her way Narcissa ought to have married Regulus.

It was a gesture of contempt, one that Bellatrix had been able to leave behind after Lucius' services to the Dark Lord but had become automatic with Druella. "She is... otherwise occupied at the moment," he said formally. "I would be grateful if you did not press me further." He nodded towards the silver tea service. "Did you order the elf? Very kind of you – I could do with a bite."

And he could too. Druella's eyes narrowed as he took a seat opposite her and, with little ceremony, launched into the food. But she said nothing. He could almost hear the cogs of the wheels turning in her mind – what was the matter? Where was Narcissa? Lucius had never failed to supply her with a concrete answer before. He prepared to face a battery of questions – most which would go unanswered – after he was finished. Druella would consider it impolite to interrupt him while he was so obviously, occupied otherwise.

She opened a book, a thin manuscript with gilt illustrations and flourishes and curlicues in a graceful, medieval hand. When he'd finished his third crumpet she interrupted. He was so startled that she'd bothered to say anything before he'd finished the whole plate – Lucius' favorite sweets were crumpets, made by Puffin, his mother's old house-elf – that he nearly choked through his tea. Contrary to her customary disapproving look at this inelegance, she continued speaking.

"I ran down to Lockwind, that fortress young Sirius inherited – perfectly barbaric, the way it's kept, but still – and I thought you might like to read this. It might prove... useful."

Perhaps it was only a trick of the firelight but there was a curious red gleam in her blue eyes as she handed him the manuscript. *A trip down to Lockwind? How strange...* "What is this?" he said and frowned as he scanned the page. "Medieval French – would you care to translate it for me?" His title sounded French but the only language

he'd ever managed to get a good grip on was English – and a snatch or two of mispronounced German. Languages – that was Cissy and Draco's strong point. He clenched his fist, and his thigh stiffened as he thought of Draco. Outwardly, his face was as calm as ever.

Druella took the manuscript. "Roughly, it translates as, *Transmutation of the Corporeal Containments of a Human Soul, Substitution, and Phase of Equilibrium.*" She looked up at him and there was an unnatural smile on her face, a smile that reminded him uncannily of the jack-o-lanterns they used to deck the ballroom in for Cissy's annual Halloween Masque. Draco liked to carve their faces, even now.

"Pray continue," he managed to say.

She did and he wished she hadn't. "The body is but a vestment for the soul, to be put on and off according to season."

*Season? More like dark magic.*

"The most foul and accursed of the black races that trawl this sweet earth, the Dementor, is the only creature living that may take the soul from the body by means of the Fiend's touch of its Kiss. Of the passage of the soul into the next world, little is known."

*I suppose little was known in the fourteenth century. Perhaps little is known even now, though the Unspeakables insist it isn't.*

"On the clay seals of Babylon, brought over from lands shrouded in mystery – they meant India – black curses are writ, curses that may permit them of proper skill and knowledge to change, in lawless transgression of Nature's law, the vestment of the soul. May the Good God who watches all strike down those who employ such arts for their mystic sorceries!"

*Guess the author of that was a muggleborn – they were usually the ones most concerned about God in the 1300s.*

"But there is hope yet left for those who suffer, suffer without-"

Lucius held up a hand. He'd finished his crumpets and he'd finished his tea. He had far more important things to worry about than Druella's latest academic discovery. "It's quite interesting, but really Druella, this is not the time for this. Druella, there's something you need to know – it's about Cissy. And Draco. Draco has-

"Oh, but I do know, Lucius." Her voice was soft and low, rising barely above the crackle of the flaming logs on the hearth. "I know and that's why I'm helping you. So that you'll help me too." And before he could even open his eyes, she'd pulled out her wand in one swift, clean motion, with a dueler's grace. A curse cracked through the library like a whiplash and he fell, rigid, like a board to the floor.

*Petrificulus Totalus*. His eyes were still shut.

"You've done many foolish things this year – you and Bella. I wonder why Rodolphus didn't keep a tighter leash on her – he used to be so sensible. But all's well that ends well, isn't it? Open your eyes." His eyes flickered open of their own accord as she loosened her curse on him. His limbs were tight and taut, and his breath came out in ragged, jerky gasps. *Cassandra's ass*.

"Last summer – do you remember what you gave to Bella? An inconsequential, little diary – inconsequential perhaps, but one you ought never have parted with. Why? Tell why now – who did it belong to?"

He could talk now. "The Dark Lord."

"Good boy. Perhaps I'll have the house-elves send you a crumpet later on."

Was it Judgment Day? *I repent me of my calumnies for Satan did drive hard at my door*. Something like that. Wild thoughts flitted through his brain as he tried to grasp the situation – tried and failed. Flashes of color and sound and scent – his Mother reading him Bible stories when he was a child, Bella with her wild ideas, when she was a child, a young girl, and then a woman, Cissy, so fair, so golden, so different from her mad sister. Damn Bella...

“I assume you meant to send it to the Longbottom boy – from what I’ve heard you and the Potters have been on strained but courteous terms for the past few years and, of course, your son was friends with Neville as well as the little girl...”

*What do the Potters have to do with this whole twisted mess? Wait, wasn’t their daughter...*

“But Draco must have made a mistake. Quite understandable – after all, he is only twelve. Children are known to err, but it is their parents who must be judged. So it went on to James Potter’s daughter... a nice child I’ll admit, so sweet, so submissive.”

*What? What?! WHAT?*

“And life being uncertain as it is – I hadn’t wagered of the inquest into the children’s dormitories – I thought that I’d, what is that phrase, oh yes... cut and run while I’m still ahead. Or should it be cut my losses? Oh well, never mind, I’m still ahead. But you... Lucius, you have much to answer for. Get up.”

He felt the force on his body surge for a moment until the pain in his muscles built into a crescendo, and then slowly relax. Draw away. Sea waves on a beach. Draco loved the sea. Just like his grandfather. He rose to his feet, a man.

“Now bow.”

He bowed. He was lesser than a man – what man let the son he loved, his child, suffer so through no fault of his own? He bowed because he’d realized who it was – he who was both lesser and greater than a man. A vapid nothingness of shadow and smoke. An all-encompassing power.

She – he? What had happened to Druella? – was striding towards the teak writing desk. “You will send a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Potter – or no, send it to Sirius Black. He’ll be at home and, yes, his love for the girl, might overcome Mr. Potter’s... scruples. He was always such a forceful boy when he wanted to be – a pity Walburga and Orion couldn’t make a better man of him, he had potential. Never mind – you will write and tell them to run down to Lockwind.”

“Why should they?”

“Because,” Druella said slowly, a ghastly smile on her face, “I have this.” There was a diary-sized book on the writing table, bound in green velvet with writhing silver snakes and clasps. “Draco thought brown paper would be too plain a garment for a diary to send to his friend. A tasteful choice in colors – though bordering mildly on the baroque. Quite like his aunt. But I digress – open the book for yourself, I’ve had much work to do to bring back the former entries.”

He opened the first page. A sentence jumped out at him.

*And inside, I’m a horrible person too. The Mirror of Erised told me that. I saw myself killing someone, someone I know very well. The funny thing is, I have no idea why I would want to kill that person. Sometimes I do tell him “I going to kill you!” but that’s only in fun, never seriously. I’m an almost-murderess. Eck. How is that supposed to improve my mood?*

He flipped to the next page, wondering whose diary it was. James’? Lily’s? Was this supposed to be a form of blackmail?

*I sicced a bench on Padma Patil today, a bench. She’s in the Hospital Wing with a concussed skull and several cracked bones. I broke Neville’s collarbone when I was nine by throwing him off a tree. I set a clutch of rabbits on Harry when I was eight and now he’s got rabbit-o-phobia. I risked killing myself, Neville, and Ron when I was seven. When I was four, I told Rick Blair that you’d get strong muscles and bones if you ate a pot of glue and then pretended to do that. He dumped the contents of three pots of glue down his throat in five seconds. He spent two nights at the hospital.*

*Does all that make me capable of murdering someone?*

Padma Patil? Not Keya and Govind’s daughter? One of the twins?

**You are an insanely possessive person. Domineering to the point of being dictatorial, jealous of the slightest encroachments on what you perceive to be your territory... I don’t know about now, but then you wanted to keep him to yourself forever, seal**

**him to you. And what better way then by sending him to his death, where he would never be anyone else's?**

*I'm going to be calm, right now. Do you have any idea how warped that sounded?*

"Whose is this?" he asked, strangely calm, already knowing, and already understanding.

"Rose's," Druella said, almost fondly. "An amusing child, isn't she?" She sounded like she was talking about a favorite niece. "These conversations will make it eminently clear that the young lady in question has been spending the last few months chatting away with a figment of a dark soul. Mine, actually. But there's more – here, flip to the last page. Take this quill and write something to... no, you wouldn't be interested in her, but Draco's there. Write to Draco."

*What the... oh for God's sake, this goes beyond profanity!* He obediently took the quill – eagle feather, his tired mind registered dimly – and hesitantly set it to the page. "What should I write?"

Druella shook her hand impatiently. "Oh, anything – hello, how are you... why ask me?"

*Draco? Hello?*

He didn't know why he'd added question marks. A fraction of a second later, the letters disappeared, replaced by ones in a different handwriting but in the same ink.

***WHO IS IT? FATHER? MOTHER? WHERE AM I? I WANT TO GO HOME! I WANT TO GO HOME! I WANT TO...***

"Not very imaginative," Druella said delicately, prying the diary away from Lucius' numb fingers and snapping it shut. "But never mind – we have work to do."

"That was... Draco?" Lucius whispered hoarsely.



“Yes – he sounds rather frightened, don’t you think? Better to get this mess cleared – he wants his Mother, he wants to go home. Don’t you think we’d better oblige him?”

Lucius sat down in a chair. He sat and was surprised he hadn’t fallen. “What,” he said, still in that same hoarse whisper, thinking of those letters, those letters in his beautiful son’s handwriting. He choked. “What did Draco ever do to you?”

“What did Ronald Weasley ever do to Bellatrix Black? Rhetoric is all very well in its place but this is not the place. Now – about the letters. Send the book and summarize all I’ve said to you. Write to Narcissa, asking her to come down to Lockwind as well – her presence is vital. Console her – assure her Draco will be fine. He will be fine, I assure you. I am not cruel and I do not intend to wipe out your line completely, though I ought to.”

Lucius did not believe her. Not one little bit. But he had to make Narcissa believe her. *Cissy, everything will be alright. On my love, I promise you that.* Oh hell. “What next?” He tried to keep his voice cool. It wavered. His façade wavered, trembled, fell. *Oh, Draco...*

“That,” Druella said, fondly patting the manuscript, “is for me to know and you to find out. Dear me, do I send like a young lady intending to bestow her virginity on one of her suitors? Miss Potter has rather rubbed off on me.”

Lucius strode beyond her and sat down at his writing desk, beginning to pen the letter to Narcissa.

**000**

*Cissy,*

*I love you. And because you know that I love you and that I would never send you a false promise, I want you to Apparate to Lockwind as soon as you receive this. Leave Draco – he will be fine. I have found help... of a sort. Just trust me.*

*I love you.*

*Your Lucy*

**000**

*Sirius Pollux Black,*

*It has been long since I last penned a letter to you. Let me state the facts as simply and concisely as possible: my son is currently in the same position as your goddaughter. If you wish to save her soul, you will reach Lockwind – I trust you have not forgotten the fortress you inherited two winters ago? – by six in the evening. Attached is a diary that my son gifted to your goddaughter on the occasion of her last birthday. Attached with it is a note, explaining further.*

*I hope to see you soon at Lockwind.*

*Lucius Romulus Malfoy*

**000**

*Lily,*

*Home. NOW!*

*Very Serious Sirius*

**000**

*James*

*All the king's owls have attacked. And when I mean king's owls, I mean White-Fronted Scops. You know what that means, right? Good.*

*Sirius*

**000**

"Let's rehash the situation, shall we?"

Sirius stifled a unique combo of a sigh and groan when Remus looked pleadingly at him. "If that's what you want, Lily, fine by me. Only this is just the fourth time, so..."

“What he means,” Remus supplemented gracefully to the lady with the irate eyes, standing menacingly in front of the stove, armed with a letter and, for some odd reason, a spatula. “Is that he’s worried. But, of course, I – we – have faith in your impeccable judgment. Sirius, if you would please?”

With a surprising strength of will – surprising to James and Remus, but not to Lily, who considered it only her due – Sirius did not roll his eyes. Against nearly insurmountable odds too. “I was sitting quietly here, fending that big, yellow cat of yours off my legs, and making sure Snidget wasn’t trying to swallow her thumb, and that Harry was swallowing his apple when an owl tapped on the windowsill. A White-Fronted Scops Owl to be precisely precise.”

James smiled wanly. Lily ignored the jab.

“That must have been... eleven-thirty? Yes, around then. Well, I recognized that owl because Lucius Malfoy is probably the only wizard in Britain who has the nerve to raise endangered Asian owls in his menagerie. Wand clutched tightly in hand, I opened the window. I did not expect the letter to blow up since, it was, as I have mentioned, carried by a valuable owl. If I had, I would have taken the necessary precautions. I, Lily of my bosom, would never have taken such flagrant liberties where the security of your dear children were concerned.”

“I, Sirius of my heart, am flattered. I am also armed with a wand, as you may chance to remember.”

“And a spatula,” he said under his breath. “I took the letter and the owl flew away. Quite typical of owls that do not require a return answer. I read it once. Harry and Snidget and that infernal cat stared. I read it twice. Then I wrote to you two, and sent the children upstairs with the cat and a whole cake. Then I sat here and waited. That, I believe is all. It is a bland account, unfurnished by the wealth of the ruminations that flitted through my weary mind. If you would care to listen to those...”

“No, thank you,” Remus said quickly, while Lily simmered in fury. “So,” he said, trying to infuse some brightness into his tone. “What do you think?”

Lily stood in front of the table and scanned the letter Lucius Malfoy had sent Sirius. "It could be a trap."

"What trap, Lils?" Sirius asked harshly. He was sitting on one of the comfortable light wood chairs of the kitchen. There were sunflowers in the glass vase next to him. In spite of this, he looked menacing. Ominous. *Black*. She moved closer towards James. "I know how much Lucius loves Narcissa and I know exactly how much Narcissa loves Draco – they would never joke about this."

"Well," Lily protested, "we've got to look at all options. This is just ridiculous – that diary could just be..."

"I," Sirius said loudly, "am just *tired* of all your excuses. If you want to sacrifice Rose's life, just because of your *stupid*..."

"I do not want to sacrifice Rose's life!" Lily said sharply, her eyes glinting. "Sirius, I know this has hit all of us hard but there's a limit to what you can say. Behave yourself."

His eyes hardened, but he nodded. "I apologize for my outburst."

Beside him, Remus laid a comforting hand on his arm and said slowly, "It sounds genuine enough. And the Head of the Department of Research of Practices of Dark Magic – Professor Gordon from Salem Witches' University, the one who would have handled Rose and Draco's case – *was* found dead this morning. There's nobody equal to him in skill to... well, fix Rose and Draco. Odd coincidence?"

On cue, Sirius said, "I think not!"

On cue, Lily rolled up her eyes and turned to James. "What do you think?"

He was sitting on the kitchen counter, swinging his long legs. He'd taken off his glasses and his hazel eyes seemed small and narrow without them. He looked older than he usually did. "I can't think," he said frankly.

"Well, what does your sixth sense tell you? Your Auror's intuition?"

He didn't reply for a moment. He looked out of the window briefly, at the hoary garden. Snowflakes, light and ethereal as a first kiss, were falling. "That we're walking from the frying pan into the fire. That we're sitting ducks. That no matter what we do, life will never be the same for any of us." *And that Rose won't be Rose anymore.* He nodded towards the diary. "The corporeal containments of two human souls have been switched – I read about it in a... uh, forbidden book once – and it's classified dark magic to switch them back. Legally, Rose and Draco will never be allowed to 'change' their corporeal vestments anymore – that's the diary."

"What?" cried Lily. "But that's outrageous! Those children are innocent victims – they didn't do anything!"

"Rose did plenty," Remus said quietly. "Technically, you can't classify her a victim – she knew enough to know that the diary was dark. Why didn't she turn it in?" He put up a hand when both Lily and Sirius began to splutter, enraged, in her defense. "She's a kid and kids make mistakes. God knows, I understand. But, technically, she would be subject to some hardwearing punishment if she ever came out of that – through legal means, I mean."

"So, we turn to dark magic?" Lily said harshly. "Remus, this is ridiculous. There *must* be some other way... there must!"

"We don't know what we turn to," Remus corrected her. "All we know is that Lucius is offering us a way – isn't that right, James?"

James nodded.

"And, in this case, the decision rests entirely between you two. I can't offer any more advice."

Lily looked hopelessly at James. James smiled a little. "Have I ever mentioned how beautiful your eyes are when they're in the slough of despair?"

"Excuse me? Wait a minute... *what?*"

James couldn't help it. He laughed. He laughed and laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks and his legs thwacked into the granite

counter with a loud bang and Lily hurried to fetch him a glass of water. Even Remus forced a small smile. Sirius sighed, but he understood. Humor was sometimes the only standby – there really was a line like that in the Aurors' Handbook of Fifty Commandments.

"OK, I'll be serious now," he said, still smiling. "I think that we should go. Listen. Negotiate, whatever."

"Negotiate – as in compromise?" Sirius asked. "I'd give my life for her if that's what Lucius wants."

"So would I," Lily said quietly.

"Perhaps, I would too," Remus said. "Yes, I think I would." They all looked at James.

He shook his head and turned to Lily with a sad, thoughtful expression in his eyes. "You can't sacrifice yourself for everyone. Lily, Harry, and Snidget they need me, as much as I need Rose."

Lily said nothing, but she would remember that line. She would remember for the end of her life.

"Well, then, what are we waiting for?" Sirius asked, trying to force a smile on his face. "Let's get ready!"

**000**

Lockwind, as Sirius very well knew from childhood visits, was a gloomy place, even in the clear light of day. Light itself was rare in that fortress, painted black by a thousand griefs and a thousand despairs; sorrow, pain, and loss saturating every chink in the heavy stone blocks that made up the castle. There were stained glass windows galore, stately art pieces inserted far after the real castle had been built, and the lacy light, feathered with golden dust mites, that glided in colorful shadow patterns on the floors were certainly beautiful. Beauty was not always welcome, rarely a thing to aspire to.

There were ghosts of rose-white beauty and rose-red pain in the castle, his grand-aunts and grandmothers, daughters of a forgotten time, nay, daughters of forgotten gods. Maud was one – Maud and he

had been such companions once when he was a little boy, easily bored. A nine-year-old Saxon princess – as she termed herself, though he couldn't be too sure about the veracity of that – she'd been raped and killed by Norman invaders, by the Lords Noir.

One of them must have been a great-grandfather of his.

She was only one – there were others like her, specters, silent for the most part, lost in the gap between time and eternity. What if that had happened to Rose?

The snow fell in flurries and there were stars glittering in the deep indigo-blueness of the evening sky. The castle stood out like a vast behemoth, its shape outlined by the dying light of the west.

There was a woman on the frost-laden stone steps, her lacy mittened hands resting on the carved balustrades, and she seemed part and parcel of the whole enterprise. Ice Queen. A heavy black shrouded her figure but it was apparent that she was tall and slightly-built. Her sleek, pale blond hair she'd pinned into a severe knot on top of her head. The simplicity of her attire and hairstyle emphasized the fashionable hollowness of her cheeks and the dark shadows under her large, blue eyes.

Even Sirius sympathized with her.

"Mr. and Mrs, Potter, Sirius," she greeted them with a strained smile. "Come – come in."

They strode into the dark hall, Narcissa lighting the iron candelabras as she walked by. She spoke rapidly as she walked and her words were garbled, jumbled as though she didn't know quite what she was saying.

"My mother is not herself. It was she who initiated the negotiations and we... we have agreed that all that will occur tonight will be mere discussion. No action will be taken." She turned suddenly and looked straight at Lily. "You will understand a mother's plight, Mrs. Potter. I... I am quite at a loss at what to do but Lucius – I – have faith in hi- I mean, my mother's abilities. We will help you, in return for your help."

“Of course,” Lily said, touched.

Narcissa nodded sharply and threw open a pair of heavy, dark-wood doors. The room had evidently been furnished in a hurry – Sirius had inherited only the property and the catacombs at Lockwind, all the furniture and silverware in the castle had gone to Narcissa, and Narcissa had donated a small portion to Andromeda and Nymphadora. There was a fire in the great stone-and-wood grate but the room, large with fading tapestries and a low ceiling, was chilly. Six Queen Anne chairs, evidently lifted straight from the Malfoys’ dining room, were placed around a small coffee table.

Mrs. Black, wonderfully like Narcissa, was turning over the leaves of a small, thin book when they arrived. She looked up when they entered and Lily thought she caught a curiously hungry red gleam in the woman’s eyes before she murmured, “Do sit down. You must be chilled.”

Sirius said nothing, as he took the chair next to Narcissa – Lucius was on her other side. James sat down next to him, and angled his chair carefully so that it had a good view of the door. Lily was the last and, to her discomfiture, found herself right next to Druella Black. Carefully, she withdrew the diary that she’d tucked into a pocket of her cloak and set it on the table. Sirius tilted his head slightly to the side and, without an ounce of subtlety, pulled out his wand.

Lucius Malfoy stiffened and looked towards his mother-in-law, almost as if he expected to receive her instructions.

*So, she fills in the role of matriarch in the family, does she?* Lily thought. *Odd – I never thought of Mr. Malfoy filling in such a submissive role.*

“I believe,” James said in a dull, flat drone, his fingers steepled, “That this... discussion would be more optimal if it was carried out on equal terms between both parties. Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy, Mrs. Black – if you would please remove all wands and other concealed forms of weaponry from your persons?”

“Would you, Mr. Potter?” Mrs. Black asked, smiling. “You are in no position to dictate terms. Not at this moment.”



“Neither are you, Mrs. Black, as I may remind you.” To his credit, James sounded remarkably pleasant – unhurried and unworried in fact. Lily wasn’t certain she would have been able to keep her cool in such a situation – to keep emotion from trickling into her voice.

“Actually I am.” Mrs. Black leaned forwards and now there was no mistaking the strange brightness in her eyes, the grotesque leer that marred her haughty, patrician face. No trick of firelight. Sirius had pursed up his lips and his head was cocked to the side. A trick he’d had ever since his Hogwarts days when he was busy thinking – actually thinking. “What do you think this is, Mr. Potter?”

She flung the manuscript she’d been studying on the table. Sirius was just about to lean forward and pick it up when James stopped him with a warning look first. “Wands – please.”

Without a word, Narcissa Malfoy pulled out the willowy rosewood wand that had held her hair in place, in her high knot. Her long fair hair fell about her pale face, slipping down her slim shoulders like a veil. She put it gently on the table and looked straight ahead, her gaze unseeing. As silent as his wife, Lucius threw his wand next to hers. It was the only outburst of temper he’d allowed himself to engage in that day.

Mrs. Black mouthed the word, “Fools,” but seeming to think better of it, dropped her wand on the table with a shrug. James piled Sirius’ and Lily’s wands, along with his, neatly on the table, in order of length – Sirius first, his next, Lily’s last.

It was only then that he picked up the manuscript. “*Transmutation of the Corporeal Containments of a Human Soul, Substitution, and Phase of Equilibrium*,” he muttered, casting a quick glance at it. “A masterpiece of theological argument on the sanctity of what the author perceived to be the dividing line between God’s domain and the human realm. Sound approach to truly vital problems, several centuries ago. As old and outdated as Chaucer. Incomplete as well.” He threw the manuscript back to Mrs. Black. “Did you intend to deceive us laymen with quasi-intellectual arguments? Surely you’ve got more sense than that.”

“A little test,” Mrs. Black said, gracefully accepting defeat. “An excellent thing for you, Mrs. Potter, that you never had cause to choose Sirius as your husband – he appears quite puzzled by Mr. Potter’s denouncement.”

Sirius shrugged. “A true antagonist would never stoop to such an ignoble blow. But you never were very intelligent, Bella.”

And then, suddenly, all the pieces clicked together in Lily’s mind – Bellatrix Lestrange was a Metamorphagus, she was almost certainly alive (hadn’t Lily herself believed so?), and now... now what? Had they walked right into her trap? *Well*, she thought briefly, deciding that if she had to die, she would; *At least, Harry and Snidget are safe with Remus. And Mary... Mary will look after them.*

If James was worried about imminent death, he didn’t show it. His face didn’t show anything really, it was studiously blank. “Madame Lestrange?”

Lucius Malfoy flicked a sharp look at the woman masquerading in Druella Black’s body and even Narcissa’s head rose slightly, ever so slightly. Druella ignored them and tossed her head defiantly. “My secret is in your safekeeping, cousin. So now that all this fuss is cleared up... we might get down to business now.”

“What business would we have with you?” James asked quietly. He hadn’t made a move for his wand yet, but the muscles in his neck were taut, standing out, rope-like, against the pallor of his throat. “That book is only a copy of the original manuscript by Beaumont – a stylish nineteenth-century reproduction made as a fashionable book for parlor conversation by the look of it. Incomplete. It offers no solutions.”

“Why then we’ll have to make our own solutions!”

It would have sounded extravagantly, ludicrously crazy on anyone else but not on Druella Black, not with her smile – so innocent, so charming – and the sparkle in her large, blue eyes. *It might be that Bellatrix Lestrange was crazy because of all that Black blood but the Rosiers... they played some part in her heritage.* “What do you propose?” Sirius wanted to know. His eyes were like chips of ice

when he glanced over at his cousin. Not Narcissa, whose head was bent low again, but Bellatrix, in Druella's body.

"A spell of my own creation. Do you mind if I take a stroll?" Druella stood up and in sync with her motion, James rose.

"A body," James said simply.

"No," Druella corrected him. "A soul."

"And the incantation?" James threw the question at her.

With a dueler's grace, she accepted it and shot back, "Raw power."

"And what of the energy needed?"

"I have enough."

"If you had, you would not have called us."

"Perhaps I'm in a giving mood."

"What do you want?"

"What do *you* want?"

"My daughter."

Druella smiled and finally turned towards Narcissa and Lucius. "And Cissy, dear Cissy, what do you want?"

"Draco." Narcissa's voice seemed to rise from the very depths of her soul. Laced as it was with a note of resignation, of resignation and grief, but acceptance, Lily knew that something bad was going to happen. Something, very bad. Narcissa was looking at Druella now and her face was so pale that Lily thought she might faint. "And if that be at the cost of my soul... then so be it."

Lily opened her mouth but Sirius was faster than her. "You're not Bellatrix," he snarled, looking up in wonder at Druella. "Bellatrix would never have toyed with her sister's life. What did you do to Druella Black?"

"She is in a better world," Druella said quite sanctimoniously. "Supping in Paradise, dancing in fields of asphodel... whatever you like. As Narcissa will be, soon enough."

"No!" Lucius Malfoy's voice cut through the taut air. It was the first time he'd spoken.

"Yes," Druella cooed, sounding perfectly delighted. It was revolting. "Your wife or your son – choose, Lucius."

Lucius opened his mouth but no words came out. Narcissa laid a slim, lacy, mitten-covered hand on his shoulder, placating. "It's my choice," she said softly. She already sounded like a ghost, a voice issuing from the heart of a sepulcher, an echo, a morbid shadow of a living thing.

"I will act as proxy..." Lucius had already begun to say but Druella stopped him with an impatient wave of her hand.

"We need you to do better things in life," she said sharply. "We need you to grow and learn from this – as you no doubt will. We need you to train your son and do credit to your birth and lineage. She – what is she? Other than the birth of her child, she has contributed little to our cause." *She is dispensable.* "You are at freedom to accept or decline my offer."

"I accept." The words were simple but there was a resounding finality about them that not even Lucius dared to counter. Narcissa looked up with bright, hot, shining eyes. "Tell me what I must do."

Druella opened her mouth but Sirius interrupted her. "And what about us?"

"You children ask too many questions," Druella said grandly, looking a little disgruntled that her speech had been interrupted. She sat down again on her chair and James sat down as well. "Wouldn't it be best if I explained the whole procedure to you?"

"Naturally," Lily said and was surprised at how dry her voice sounded. "We would be most obliged if you would kindly care to explain the whereabouts of our children's... souls at this moment as well."

“Miss Potter is in a diary and Draco is nowhere in particular,” Druella said baldly. “In technical terms, you Unspeakables would call it a void, wouldn’t you? A nothingness?”

*A vapid nothingness of shadow and smoke. An all-encompassing power.* Lucius Malfoy pressed his wife’s fingers tightly. She squeezed them back and a pale shadow of a smile lit up her face.

“You’ve read about curses that depend on the wizard or witch it was inflicted by – those curses which can be reversed only by the curser and by none else? Standard N.E.W.T level information. Miss Potter, who is presently residing in a diary, had performed a simple curse of that sort, suited to her powers, upon Mr. Malfoy shortly before... fainting.”

“In other words, she was possessed and the possessor left her body, causing her to faint, yes?” James asked, leaning forward. “And as her soul was... well, not available, as you might say, her faint became...”

“Longer than normal,” Druella supplied gracefully. “It’s only been twenty-four hours. And being in no position to reverse the curse on Draco...”

“Their souls are intertwined,” Sirius whispered hoarsely. “Unless she’s freed, he won’t be.”

Druella nodded. “And,” Narcissa was saying, “I will forfeit my own soul in exchange for hers. Wherefore she will free Draco from his curse.” She nodded. “Yes I see.”

“Would you give up your soul for a chit of a girl? A halfblood of no consequence, of no worth?” Druella sounded coldly amused.

Narcissa’s voice did not waver as she said, “If it meant my son’s soul, yes.” She turned towards James and there was an odd blankness in her look, mirroring the one on James’ face, as she said, “You owe me and mine a wizard’s debt.”

“A blood debt if you wish it,” James said simply. It was not a simple promise – while wizard’s debts continued only for the two wizards directly involved in the magical bond, a blood debt contained through

the generations, affecting each and every member of the generations that would follow, affecting hundreds of individuals instead of only two. *And it will end only with the end of the seventh generation.* A deadly curse.

“Just what I had in mind! My, how quickly you children catch on. I inked a contract for a blood debt here-”

“That’s illegal!” Lily cried, “According to the Wizengamot Appellate and the Bills signed by the International Council in the nineteenth century, all magical implements that may aid in the formation of a deliberate, ‘cold-blooded’, verbal agreement to form a blood debt are...”

“As illegal as is my presence in Britain.” Druella laughed. “Mrs. Potter, you are a treasure.”

Lily subsided, feeling incredibly foolish. *We’ve riddled the legal system with bullet holes – what’s the harm in shooting a cannonball through it now?*

“I’ll just *Accio* for it, shall I? Saves trouble.” She picked up the wand and after an almost imperceptible flick of it, a scroll and a pair of quills zoomed through the air and arranged themselves neatly on the table. “Mr. Potter? Mr. Malfoy?” Blood debts were, traditionally, signed by males. Not anymore, of course – signing a blood debt was *illegal* now.

“Lily?” There was a question in James’ voice and in his eyes as well.

She took a deep breath, looked at Druella, and then back at James. “I see no other option.” *And this will affect us as well as Rose and Harry and Snidget and their children and their children’s children and down, down through the centuries...*

James picked up the quill and signed his name fluidly at the end of the contract. “Nice paper,” he said admiringly, wiping his bloody palm on his black cloak.

“Thank you,” Druella said graciously.

Without any fuss – though his face was as dark as a thundercloud – Lucius Malfoy also signed his name.

“Well,” Druella said brightly, clapping her hands, “Let the festivities begin!”

**A/N: Yeah... yeah, I know I said I'd update soon. Blame this on  
fests, eye check-ups, report cards, dancing, sleep deprivation,  
writer's block, school, fictionpress... get the picture?**

**Sic**

“Yes.”

Sirius held up a hand. In the most casual of voices, he asked, “Shouldn’t we have the children transported here? It would arouse considerable suspicion if they were to awaken, of their own accord, at-” he glanced at his watch, “seven at night.” It was at that moment that James chose to shift his chair ever so slightly towards the door. His eyes caught Lily’s and she uncrossed her legs, her lips tightening. Lucius and Narcissa did not notice and Druella gave no appearance of having seen either.

“Be that as it may, we have no time,” Druella said silkily.

“What a pity,” Lily sighed, and Druella’s head turned towards her.

In that instant, James’ figure dissolved into a tan-and-black blur at the edge of Lily’s vision. She heard a rippling scream and threw herself out of her chair, flat onto her back on the floor, shielding her face with her arms. An explosion ripped through the air and she felt sharp glass pricking the soft skin of her hands. There was no time to think, no time to speak or scream and she was on her feet, her cloak whirling crazily around her ankles even as shards – remnants of the table, she just had time to register – rained down. And then, something – something hot and painful – from the back knocked her down and she was skidding across the stone floor and, no, she was high in the air and *now*, she was screaming, screaming in pain as the wool of her cloak sizzled. Thin tongues of flame, lacing about her ankles, her waist, and around her neck, held her in place.

Sirius was on his knees, coughing blood, and James on his feet, his eyelashes glittering because of the shards of glass that clung to them. Lucius was sprawled across the floor, clutching his chest, a ghastly pallor over his face. Narcissa, as white as her husband, a bloody scratch running down her cheek, was holding her wand to Druella’s throat. Druella opened her mouth to say something, but then sighed, rubbing the cut on her forehead. “Game over,” she whispered, looking at James. “Didn’t you think I’d be sensible enough to paper the whole room with Anti-Apparition charms?”



“Let her go,” James snarled and the former blankness in his eyes was gone.

“She’ll keep for sometime,” Druella said lazily, even as Lily fought to keep from screaming, fought to keep still and relax. “That was pure cheek on your part – unmitigated cheek. I thought we were above all this?” She tsked sad. “I think this calls for a penalty of some sort – Narcissa, what do you think?”

Narcissa made no reply but, before Druella could smile in satisfaction and turn again to James, her wand shot upward and Lily fell to the floor. Her knees hurt and her neck – god, her neck, felt horrible – but it was alright. Everything was alright. Everything was alright. She crawled over to Sirius and picked up the wand he’d dropped, wondering what counter-curse to perform.

“Insolent girl,” Druella hissed.

With inimitable elegance, Narcissa tossed her long, blond hair over her shoulder. “My Lord,” she murmured, sweeping Druella a curtsy of eighteenth-century courtliness. She wore a black wool cloak and she was wan and her cheek bleeding, but at that moment she was more beautiful than she’d ever been. “I trust I may hold you to your promise,” she said, her voice ringing. “Or is the Dark Lord now so poor in soul – as he is in body – that he will not keep his promises?”

Lily murmured the counter-spell over Sirius and ran her fingers down the taut tenseness of his abdomen. “Shh,” she whispered, as he tried to speak. “It’ll be OK.” *It won’t.*

“Bind them – it concerns only us,” Druella said. With a dancer’s grace, Narcissa’s slender arm curved in a high arc, her wand flashing white-and-gold sparks as she drew it. Lily froze in place, and felt the tightness in her wrists and ankles, locking her in place. She did not try to resist it – it was best not to, for these types of binding spells. Instead, she let it within her and felt the strangeness of her limbs ease, loosen.

Narcissa had not bound her husband, but perhaps that was only to be expected. Lucius dragged himself into a sitting position on one of the chairs, muttering a healing spell over his ribs. The diary, which had

toppled to the floor, flew into Druella's outstretched arm. A long glass shard stuck right out of it. Narcissa conjured a small table, a very plain one, and dragged a chair over to it.

The diary – the damned, cursed diary – was put on the table and opened. Lily shivered as she remembered what Rose had written in it. “You will suffer a fate worse than death, you know,” Druella told her. “Your body will die, but your soul – ah, your soul will be entrapped within layers of parchment for all eternity. An eternity without time. How does that appeal to you?”

“It does not appeal to me at all,” Narcissa said serenely, without any change of expression. “Lucius will see to it that the diary is destroyed – I will *not* go into my eternal restlessness, garbed in this fashion. I suppose,” she said acerbically, “you have disposed of my mother?”

Druella nodded.

“A double funeral for us then,” Narcissa said and she grimaced. “It will be hard for Draco.” She looked towards Sirius and smiled faintly, “I always knew you'd be the death of me.”

Sirius smiled raggedly and Lily could practically hear what he was thinking, *Only the good die young*. By this last deed, Narcissa would be forever redeemed in her cousin's eyes.

“Be gentle when you break it to Meda,” she said. She looked over her shoulder at Lucius who was staring at her, almost incredulously, as if he couldn't believe what she was saying – her last goodbyes. “I've always loved you. I'll always love you.”

“Always,” he echoed and, for a moment, it looked like it was he whose soul was being drawn out from his body.

Then Narcissa turned back to Druella and her long hair fell about her face, screening it, until all Lily could see was the tip of her nose. A very pale, very beautiful nose – white marble. “I am ready.”

“Put her hands here,” Druella instructed her, sounding very businesslike. “Relax, breath slowly. Narcissa-” her shoulders were trembling but with a supreme effort of will, she made them stop. She

took a deep breath and then let it out raggedly. It was not easy, marching to your death, in a room full of those who had once been enemies. “You know Latin? Excellent – now when I say these lines, reply fittingly, and make this motion – so. Yes, exactly like that. Do you understand?”

“It’s that simple?” James demanded critically.

Druella turned towards him. “Would you like to try for yourself?” She nodded towards Narcissa. “Have you composed yourself sufficiently?”

Narcissa nodded, and held her wand with hands slick with sweat.

*“Ego hic redono absolutus quod universa principatus omnigenus meus animus...vitualamen is ut donum per meus solvo mosut suus quisnam est ligatio intus is terrenus tumbus,”* Druella intoned, and the words were like the words of a song. A black dirge of funerals.

*I hereby give up absolute and complete dominion of my soul... offering it as a gift by my free will to her who is imprisoned within this earthly tomb*

“Sic,” Narcissa breathed and her wand looped thrice through the air in a complicated gesture. Inexplicably, Lily was reminded of a butterfly – a butterfly, held in place on a moldy spreading board by a long glass pin, flapping its gossamer wings for the last time. She finished by bringing down her wand hard on the open page of the diary. Like an axe. To sever a neck.

James waited for an explosion. Lily waited for a scream of torment. Sirius waited for nothing, because he knew – knew from the tremble of Narcissa’s shoulders – that nothing would happen. She wasn’t ready.

And she wasn’t. Nothing happened.

Druella looked rather like she’d expected that as well. “I asked you whether you had composed yourself sufficiently. I gave you time. This is no child’s play, Narcissa Black; it is a gamble of souls. Your son’s,

as I remind you again, lies in the balance.” She steepled her fingers and frowned rather like McGonagall used to, at particularly rambunctious pupils. “You need to infuse more feeling into your voice. You need to enter into the meaning of that word. *Sic*. Yes. Say it.”

“*Sic*.” Narcissa’s voice was as bland as toothpaste. Druella’s eyes flashed in anger.

James chose that moment to strike. It was cruel of him, but then what else was there for him to do? His daughter’s life hung in the balance. “Think of Draco,” he said. “Think of him... he must be frightened, mustn’t he? Swirling in a transparent mist of nothingness, seeing nothing, feeling nothing... only the fear.”

*“Ego hic redono absolutus quod universa principatus omnigenus meus animus...”*

“All by himself. It’s not dark and it’s not light there, Narcissa, it’s not hot and it’s not cold. What is it then? What do you think it is?”

*“Vitalamen is ut donum per meus solvo mos ut suus quisnam est ligatio intus...”*

“It’s hell.”

*“...terrenus tumbus.”*

“*Sic*.”

And then a scream of agony rent the air. Ink spluttered, frothing like black blood, from the white pages and the flames roared. Narcissa’s head shot back, her eyes rolling in her head, her face twisted into a look that Lily never wanted to see. Lucius let out a cry as her chair fell back and she fell to the stone floor, a limp, slack body.

“Amen,” Druella murmured, running a finger over the pages. She stood up and pulled the hood of her cloak over her head. “Well then,” she said with a polite nod, “I suppose this means goodbye.” And then, she Disapparated with a small pop.

“Bastard!” Sirius howled emptily. “Must have removed the Apparation spells at the last minute...”

Lucius had been kneeling on the floor, his wife’s head resting on his lap, but at Sirius’ words he looked up. With a sharp jab of his wand, he released the binding spells on James, Sirius, and Lily. “Now,” he said harshly. “You will come with me.” He was looking at James.

“Go home,” James sighed to Lily and Sirius, an incredibly exhausted look on his face. “Go home... I’ll be back soon.”

Lily rubbed her wrists and rose to her feet. “Be safe,” she whispered, leaning up on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. “Bring her back.” He squeezed her fingers. She dropped down to her feet and turned her head just in time to catch the fleeting expression on Lucius’ look. The raw wounds. Suddenly, she wished she hadn’t kissed James – it had just been so cruel of her.

*She’ll never kiss him goodbye again.*

She waited until she’d Apparated back to Godric’s Hollow to cry – cry for what? For everything. Then, she broke down, on the doorstep, in the darkness, surrounded by slush and trampled snow. Without a word, Sirius held her.

**000**

She was frozen in a bed of ice and the terror held her as strongly as iron bands. She was freezing and goosebumps broke out, creasing through her flesh like a wildfire, even while she lay under the thick blankets. Her teeth chattered in fear and she was too frightened to open her eyes. It was all around her, even though she’d closed her eyes tightly. Shadows as cold and merciless as Dementors – *were* they Dementors? Could they be? Anything seemed possible in this twilight zone of horror, so far from life, flitted about her. Occasionally, her vision tilted and she saw – or felt she could see – flame-bright wraiths.

Flame – fire. That was her element.

*"Please help me,"* she wanted to croak. She wanted to reach out her arms and cling to them, they might bring her back, back to Mummy and Daddy and Uncle Padfoot, but she was too scared of the black shadows. Scared – when had she ever been scared? Now – not even now was she scared. She was terrified.

*"Take me with you!"* She wanted to cry, but she had no voice, not even a croak. She wasn't even a she. She was a nothing – one of the nothings, in an infinity of nothings –, past redemption, past salvation. There were no voices, no faces, no *anythings*. And she was frightened, frightened as she never had been.

"Get up, girl."

It was an illusion. She could see nothing but the blackness, and she didn't dare open her eyes. *Am I dead? Am I in hell?*

*"Now-"*

"Lucius – please. Rosalie, get up, it's Daddy."

*Is Daddy dead? What happened?*

"Rose, love, Rosalie, it really is me."

She felt a curious warmth somewhere... and then quite suddenly it came to her that she'd stopped being a nothing. She was a something. A something with hands and fingers and a racing heart and eyes that she opened the minutest fraction, almost shaking in her fear.

She tried to open her mouth. Nothing came out. She was almost paralyzed with fear – a fact not rectified by the sight of her father's warm hazel eyes.

"Oh, sweetheart..."

And then, he was kissing her cheek and she felt the drip of warm, salty tears – tears he'd held back for so long – on her cheeks and her eyelashes.

*“You’ve got beautiful eyelashes, Rose. So long. Just like your daddy and your Grandmother Dorea.”*

She wasn’t just a something. She was a somebody, a someone with a history and a past and a reality burning as clear as a beacon – a beam sent out by a lighthouse perhaps – on the hazy horizon of unreality. It made her gasp.

“Daddy,” she breathed. It was only a breath, a wisp of a word, but James choked as though he couldn’t believe it. She lifted her thin arms and he caught them, wrapping them around his neck.

“Daddy’s right here,” he said, kissing her forehead. “Daddy’ll always be there.”

He was crying, but she wasn’t. She couldn’t – not yet. She didn’t have the strength, the feeling for it left. Overwhelmingly exhausted, she rested her hot forehead against his cheek, and clung on to him for dear life.

Everything... everything would be alright. Wouldn’t it?

There are times in your life when you are so scared you scream, and there are times when you are just so beyond scared you freeze.

Five point someone

It was very cold. Dimly, her mind registered the fact as her father pulled the blankets off her and half-scooped her into his arms. Her toes felt sticky. Sticky and dirty.

“Rosalie.” His voice was very gentle, very soft, but she caught the thread of steel in it. Instinctively she stiffened and then relaxed. It’d be alright. Daddy had said it’d be alright. “Rosalie, Rosalie.” He was almost cooing, cooing as you might a lullaby to a tired child. She leaned into his hold, into the warm, comfortable circle of his arms. “You have to fix something for me.” He picked her up, the muscles in his shoulders tensing as he took on her dead weight.

headmaster, but still –, still resting his arm on Rose’s shoulder.

Dumbledore’s first concern was for Rose. In a trice there was a steaming mug of hot chocolate, which he handed to her. “Drink,” he said and she obeyed. It was warm and good. A hesitant, sleepy smile floated over her face. Did he add something else? Then he turned towards Lucius who was shifting his wand from hand to hand, and at James who looked unmistakably guilty.

It was dim and cool. The sickly-yellow flames in the iron candle-stands flickered. Black shadows flitted on the dark walls.

Shadows as cold and merciless as Dementors – were they Dementors? Could they be? Anything seemed possible in this twilight zone of horror, so far from life, flitted about her.

“No,” she was whispering, “No, I want to go home. I want Mummy.” She hadn’t called her mother Mummy since she was a little girl. “I want Uncle Padfoot, I want Neville, I want to go home!” Her fingers dug into his shoulders. Frantic little fingers, voice pleading hoarsely with a rawness of feeling that made him want to comfort her, take her away.



Instead, all he could manage was, "Yes, we will see them. Soon, I promise. Just... wait." He set her down on Draco's bed, dimly registering the hollowness in Lucius' eyes.

Rose's eyes flitted like a frightened animal's from Draco to Lucius. Her mouth had fallen open a little. So it wasn't just a dream. And then, the uncontrollable torrent of words spilled forth. "He made me do it," she was crying, her words made even more pitiful by her cracked voice, "He told me he'd make me do it and I didn't believe it! It wasn't my fault, I didn't do it, he did it and... and..." She was shaking now.

He put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Do you remember where you last put your wand?"

She stared at him.

"Search in your pockets." That was Lucius, his fingers clutching the metal bedpost. His expression was unfathomable.

Sure enough, it was there. James took Rose's wand and winced as he handed it to Lucius. "It's been broken."

You don't deserve a wand, you useless piece of blood-trash. That's only for real witches. She hugged herself instinctively, fighting back the memory.

"P<sup>ro</sup>p<sup>ri</sup>o<sup>r</sup>i I<sup>n</sup>c<sup>a</sup>n<sup>t</sup>e<sup>m</sup> will not work then," Lucius said softly. He looked at Rose. When he spoke to her, his voice was the voice of one adult speaking to another. "Do you have any recollection of..."

She dug her fingers into her elbows, feeling the raggedy nails sink into her flesh. It hurt a little. But at least she could feel something. "I..." she swallowed, trying to remember. Her mind felt wobbly, all milk and butter (like Uncle Padfoot would say). She wanted to remember, she was trying to remember but...

James put his arm around her shoulder. "She won't have to remember. Look behind you, Lucius."

Lucius whirled around and Rose craned her neck to look behind her. Silhouetted against the doorway stood Albus Dumbledore.

And all Rose could think was, Great sense of timing.

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Glittering blue eyes, bereft of their usual benign sparkle, regarded him over half-moon spectacles. Once James would have been awed in telling Albus Dumbledore everything he knew. Once – how many times ago had that been? Tonight he drew himself to his full height – a good few inches shorter than his former

“Care to explain?” he asked politely. “Or perhaps this might not be the right time to...?”

James nodded and looked helplessly towards Draco. Dumbledore strode forwards and rested his fingers on the boy’s temple. A split second later he withdrew it, as though burnt. James wondered why. “Miss Potter?” Dumbledore’s voice was almost eerily calm. “I need you to remember something for me.”

Rose bit her lip and nodded her head by a fraction of an inch. “You don’t have to say anything – just think about what happened.” His voice was gentle, but it was a gentleness meant only to placate her. “Just...” Dumbledore took out his wand and pressed it to her forehead, “...think.” He closed his eyes for a moment and then drew his wand away. James gave Rose a reassuring squeeze. She felt cold to his touch.

“A simple spell,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Dark.” His eyes flickered to Lucius. James cleared his throat. Dumbledore shot him a penetrating look and James felt his defenses melting away. He didn’t try to hold on to them. What use was there, anymore? Dumbledore’s face was very grave indeed when he finally looked away.

“Come here. Rose.”

She went. He put his wand in her hand and held her limp wrist gently. James saw him lean forward and whisper into Rose’s ears. She

nodded. "On the count of three," he said, as tenderly as her mother would have. He still held her hand. "One..." She closed her eyes, and pressed her lips tightly together. "...Two..." Lucius shifted uneasily, and James clutched his wand, not knowing what he feared.

Will it work?

Yes, yes it must...he's here.

She was breathing raggedly, her forehead wrinkled in concentration. "Three."

Dumbledore jerked Rose's wrist sharply and the wand jabbed through the air, like a knife through butter. Pale blue sparks flashed from the tip of Dumbledore's wand. She leaned against his hold, and the tension left her face. "Yes," Dumbledore said, nodding to Lucius. "Yes – he will be alright. I will send for Madam Pomfrey. James." He looked seriously at James, the way he used to years ago, when James was just another unruly student to be disciplined.

"I'll take Rose home," James said hoarsely.

"Yes, I think you should," Dumbledore said quietly. "I shall inform her companions." He rose and half-carried Rose over to James. "Take care of her." We have much to discuss, you and I.

"I will." Perhaps we do. Perhaps we don't.

And then the man was gone, his robes billowing about him, and James stood awkwardly, clutching his daughter to him.

A/N: Three months. I worked three months and produced three pages. OK you're all mad at me and not without justification... hehe, let's just say RL decided to cut in. And let's just say that RL will probably cut in and there will be hiatuses if I decide to continue this – second year is over, thank god and I'm definitely going to put up an epilogue but if I decide to continue or not after second year... well even I'm not sure about that. So ok, take care, tell me you want me to continue this – or not –, scold me for being such a horrible writer, whatever... I've missed you guys!

## Epilogue

"And that is your final answer to me?" Dumbledore asked. "That you have no answer?"

James strengthened the barriers in his mind – well there were no barriers, not really, but Aurors liked to use terms like that and he'd gotten into the habit – though he knew that the man would be too wise to attempt Occlumency. He wasn't Albus Dumbledore for nothing. "I have an answer, yes," he said, unable to keep from shifting in his chair in the Headmaster's office. "At present however, it does not concern you." He was rather surprised, himself, at his cheek.

Dumbledore didn't look much surprised, though. He only gave a curt nod and said rather mildly, "You ought to take a vacation, James. You've been overworking." His sharp eyes raked the little gouges on his cheeks which he hadn't had time to heal yet. Not with that much action going around. He rose to his feet and said, "Well if they're both in good health, then there's nothing much else for me to do. I have your guarantee that the attacks will not continue, yes?"

"Yes," James said briefly, thinking of his daughter.

"They'll be on... holiday then?" Dumbledore asked with as much delicacy as possible in such a situation. "To return in September?" It wasn't March yet – Rose and Draco would both have a pretty long holiday.

"Lucius Malfoy might not like his son to return," James said. "From what I could gather, they will be leaving England shortly. Mrs Malfoy and Mrs Black-"

"It was good of you to inform me so early," Dumbledore said and sighed softly. "A tragic loss for young Mr Malfoy."

"Yes," James said. A tragic loss that Rose will pay for one day. Draco was only twelve now, but he would grow up soon. Twelve itself was hardly an age for childhood. And he would know about his mother's sacrifice – all for Rose's sake. James shook his head slightly – he'd

think about all that later, when he had more time. “Goodnight then, Professor.”

He looked like he had more to say, but blissfully, he didn’t say it. “Goodnight, James.”

A great man, no doubt of that.

Outside the late afternoon air was cool on his face, pleasant after the almost stifling warmth of Dumbledore’s office. Groups of students, laughing, shouting, talking, were trudging back to the castle for dinner. It would be bitterly cold very soon, though pale rays of sunshine still slanted over the landscape. It had been a remarkably beautiful day – sunny, in fact. Quite a miracle.

He smiled and stood where he was, feeling the lingering warmth of daylight on his face, and thinking about many things. Yes, it was quite a miracle. That he was still alive, that Rose was still alive, healthy in fact... He looked up and felt a smile breaking out over his face. It had been a long time since he’d smiled, he thought.

Thank you, whoever, whatever you are. Thank you.